

THE NEW MIDDLE AGES



WOMEN *in* OLD NORSE
LITERATURE

BODIES, WORDS, *and* POWER

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir



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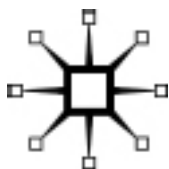
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INTRODUCTION

In medieval Icelandic secular prose, female characters function as literary vehicles to engage with some of the most contested values of the period, revealing the preoccupations, desires, and anxieties of its authors and audiences; chief among these concerns are women's access to and employment of power, and men's vulnerability. Old Norse sources offer their audiences many discrete and varied female images: women of various social and economic positions and racial origins. In this book, I analyze an extensive and diverse gallery of female images: elegant queens who keep their foolish husbands in check; wise, learned, and accomplished but haughty female rulers; scheming and disobedient princesses; and impoverished women who know a magic spell or two. We will also encounter man-eating stepmothers; benevolent stepmothers; monstrously ugly and hostile giantesses; princesses turned into hags by enchantment; resourceful widows; giantesses forsaken and left heartbroken by their human lovers; prophetesses who predict misfortune; neurotic housewives; and awe-inspiring female warriors.

These female literary characters are varied and complex, and different sagas offer different perspectives on the same problems through female characters. I will argue that many of the women in Old Norse-Icelandic literature can be seen as surprisingly powerful, and I will map out the ways in which they gain agency, whether by speech or actions, with or without social sanction. I shall explore what roles are available to these literary women, how they negotiate these roles within the restraints of patriarchy and when they are seen to transgress normative boundaries, often being depicted negatively as arrogant, overbearing, or even monstrous in these circumstances. The picture that emerges is not a simple dichotomy of "good" and "bad," or "independent" and "powerless" women, and it allows for ambiguity and subversion in itself by arguing for the monstrous Other as a category representing human qualities that are repressed and abjected, but can never be made to disappear. In short, this book deals with questions of female power and uncovers how the texts represent women as agents.

The scope of this study is wide and inclusive: I will draw from the entire corpus of extant secular, vernacular prose that was composed and committed to vellum in Iceland from the beginnings of saga literature—likely around 1200—until the dawn of the Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century. My goal is to uncover the multiplicity and

heterogeneity of female images and perspectives on women available to medieval Icelandic audiences. Old Norse–Icelandic literature has remained marginal in the broader debate about gender that has taken place in medieval studies in recent years, but the sagas are valuable and fascinating sources that offer comparable and contrasting images to those found in other medieval literature, and will undoubtedly be of interest to non-Norse specialists working on similar themes. Before outlining my theoretical approaches and premises, I will give a brief overview of this corpus and its historical background, intended to contextualize and make accessible the texts discussed in the book to the general medievalist.

Medieval Icelandic Literature and Its Diverse Female Characters

Medieval Iceland, a Commonwealth with no centralized authority or executive power from its settlement until its entry into the Norwegian monarchy in 1262, inherited and preserved the ancient, rich Nordic literary tradition of eddic and skaldic verse, transmitted orally through centuries before the arrival of written culture.¹ This poetry has long been admired for its artistry, and along with the thirteenth-century *Prose Edda*, it is a valuable source of information about Old Norse heathen myths and religion.² Eddic verse additionally relates heroic legends about Sigurðr the dragon slayer, the Völsungs, Gjúkungs, and Burgundians, narratives also preserved in other medieval Germanic sources. Skaldic verse, a metrically complex and ornate form of poetry going back to at least the early ninth century, involves specialized poetic vocabulary and techniques such as alliteration and *kennings* (circumlocutions). This panegyric verse was primarily a vehicle for a skald (court poet) to pay tribute to his king or patron, describing his generosity and courage in battle, while also showing off his own skill in the art of poetry, in return for a handsome reward and status at court.³ After the adoption of Christianity in Iceland in 999 or 1000 AD and the learned tradition and literacy it heralded, saga literature in its earliest manifestations began to appear in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, approximately at the same time as the rise of Latin historiography and vernacular fiction elsewhere in Europe. In this period, Icelanders developed a new form of storytelling, beginning with the earliest, relatively straightforward biographies of kings, and gradually arrived at more complex, nuanced, and sustained narratives about political struggles and warfare in Viking Age Scandinavia, primarily Norway.⁴ These sagas, the *konungasögur* (kings' sagas), portray the élite world of kings, magnates, retainers, warriors, and court poets, but we also encounter the occasional queen or princess who involves herself in court politics. Although built on the same methods of composition in terms of

narrative techniques, the *konungasögur* differ from more literary and largely fictional prose texts both in style and subject matter; they were not produced as entertainment for a more general audience but rather by and for a small élite of Icelanders, the Norwegian élite being another intended audience, and as such they are, as Daniel Sävborg has noted, a more homogenous corpus of texts than many others.⁵

The Icelanders were keen to write not only about Scandinavian history, but also that of their own ancestors, emigrants from Scandinavia and the British Isles who settled in Iceland in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. The *Íslendingasögur* (Sagas of Icelanders), set in Iceland (although with excursions abroad) in the ninth, tenth, and early eleventh centuries, relate the stories of these settlers and their descendants, usually centering on a single protagonist or several generations of heroes.⁶ These sagas, many of which must have preexisted in oral form and betray a debt to myth and folktale as well as traditional Germanic motifs, recount in a comparatively realistic manner the sociopolitical relationships and power struggles between families and neighbors, often resulting in blood feud and misfortune.⁷ The proud and striking woman who goads men to revenge plays an important part in prolonging the cycle of violence often depicted in these sagas, and we also encounter intriguing images of women practicing magic. Although they employ different strategies to reach their goal, both types of women are often motivated by honor, a pervasive concern in the society depicted in the *Íslendingasögur*. These sagas convey a remarkably consistent picture of real historical events and topography, and are highly sophisticated in terms of characterization, structure, and narration; although they fundamentally portray disputes in scarcely populated, agrarian communities, the narrative often takes on epic dimensions in its portrayal of heroism, betrayal, jealousy, and the tragedies of star-crossed lovers. It should be kept in mind that despite the illusion of social, historical, and topographical reality, the world of the *Íslendingasögur* is an imagined space and as such obeys the laws of literary creations. At the same time, judging from manuscript evidence, the schism between fiction and nonfiction, historiography and entertainment, and different genres, as perceived by modern scholars, was likely less important in the medieval period than today.⁸ Also important, the sagas depict a pagan society written from a Christian perspective, a fact that has a significant impact on their representation of events and characters, including women.⁹

Sagas generally considered even more realistic are the *samtíðarsögur* (contemporary sagas), compiled in the so-called *Sturlunga* collection around 1300, but written earlier. This group of sagas narrates the political turmoil and internal strife that Icelanders experienced in the

twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in particular during the so-called Sturlung Age (ca. 1220–64), when several clans violently clashed in their competition for political supremacy over the whole country. Many of the Íslendingasögur, often labeled as “classical,” were composed around the same time as the dramatic historical events related in the samtiðarsögur, and explore the cost of the (by-then) outmoded Germanic honor system involving blood vengeance, and the violence to which it leads. It could be conjectured that their authors were writing for a high-status audience that was affected by similar experiences to those depicted in the literary accounts, and that needed an outlet where their reactions and attitudes to these upheavals could be addressed. Also, the sagas likely played a role in identity formation, many of them aiming to show the ancestors of their likely sponsors in a positive light; scholars have suggested that the sagas were written in order to legitimize and consolidate the power of their commissioners.¹⁰

Saga authors continued to expand their subject matters and settings in the *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas), shifting backward in time to the legendary, heroic period before the settlement of Iceland as far back as the Great Migration. In many of these sagas, larger-than-life Viking heroes with extraordinary, sometimes superhuman, mental and physical abilities, set sail from their native Scandinavia, traveling in all directions around Europe and even into the Otherworld in order to plunder and raid, acquire riches and magical objects, conquer lands, vanquish dangerous monsters and enemies, marry noble brides, and through all these deeds achieve everlasting fame. Native Germanic, folkloric, fantastic, and romance features here combine to produce a unique kind of narrative sometimes described as hybrid or “synthetic.”¹¹ This is a particularly diverse, eclectic group of sagas: some are set in a tragic mode similar to that in eddic poetry and might contain an historical kernel of truth, while others are characterized by a playful tone, relating comic adventures with a happy ending.¹² Female characters in these texts appear in a variety of guises as wise and peaceful queens, monstrous giantesses, or ambiguously gendered warrior women. The *fornaldarsögur* too show an effort to enhance the genealogy and ancestry of their authors, compilers, or commissioners, and despite a fantastic and often lighthearted exterior, they are often preoccupied with the ideas of honor, heroism, royal authority, and relations between the hero-subjects and kings, similarly suggesting that they were produced by and for a powerful élite.¹³ These entertaining narratives were likely read out loud for large audiences at feasts; the sagas’ frequent didactic messages, instructing the audience on ethics, morals, and ideal social behavior, suggest their audiences are likely to have been of all classes.

Finally, the *riddarasögur* (chivalric sagas), set in southern climes, are either translated or adapted versions of Francophone courtly literature, including Arthurian romance, *chansons de geste* and *lais*, or indigenous imitations of these.¹⁴ The translations are the products of a project begun at the instigation of the Norwegian king Hákon Hákonarson (1217–63), whose aim in introducing his court to literature popular with Anglo-Norman, French, and German nobility was to civilize the aristocracy and to promote royal ideology.¹⁵ Thus romance came to be the literature of prestige at the Norwegian court, replacing skaldic verse as the dominant form of cultural capital (as defined by Pierre Bourdieu), and it quickly made its way to Iceland, where authors made use of stock themes, plots, and motifs in their own creations.¹⁶ These sagas transport the audience into an alternate universe governed by entirely different laws, bearing little or no resemblance to those found in native Icelandic literary tradition or society. Although the subject matter and style of these chivalric narratives, featuring knights on quests for fame, property, and noble brides, will be more familiar to the general medievalist reader, as Sif Ríkharðsdóttir has illuminated, in translation, these romances went through a process of adaptation into their new Nordic context and cultural discourse.¹⁷ As a case in point, the indigenous romances sometimes incorporate indigenous motifs: the popular maiden-king, an independent, unmarried woman who rules her own kingdom, is unique to medieval Icelandic romances, several of which feature this figure as the central character.

These two last, more fantastic saga genres, whose boundaries are often blurred since they share subject matters and narrative structures, were long considered to be nothing more than escapist entertainment. The plots are predictable, and the characters tend to be one-dimensional, lacking the psychological complexity of those of the best *Íslendingasögur*. Their sponsors and audiences, the aristocratic ruling class in Iceland after the fall of the Commonwealth, consisted, on the one hand, of social groups whose prosperity and status was growing due to their participation in the booming fishing industry, and, on the other, of members of the administrative class who ruled in the name of the king. Geraldine Barnes plausibly suggests that the social group for which the *riddarasögur* were produced had elements of the *nouveau riche* about them, drawing a link between Icelandic audiences and those of Middle English romance, similarly composed of well-to-do mercantile and administrative knightly classes: both audiences seem to have had a healthy appetite for formulaic, sensationalist “pulp fiction,” rife with sex, violence, and wonders.¹⁸ Critics now regard the extant texts from this period as offering a unique opportunity to explore how these people imagined and

debated social organization and its premises, and expressed their ideologies, concerns, and desires.¹⁹

The Old Norse–Icelandic saga corpus forms a hugely rich source of information to uncover medieval Icelandic attitudes to their world, and the contemporary discourse regarding diverse topics, not the least important of which are (appropriate, heteronormative) gender roles and power differences based on those. Literary genres in separate modes, often produced by separate social groups or subcultures, and likely intended for divergent audiences with different expectations, convey competing ideologies, and aspirational characters and ideal behavior, synchronically. Analyzing them together presents challenges and possibilities. Saga authors writing in a realistic genre were likely restricted to a more limited range of plausible female characters and situations in which they could appear than their counterparts who produced fantastic literature, and thus images of women do not necessarily unproblematically correspond or overlap between genres. Individual genres consistently privilege one or two types of female figures, reflected in this book: each chapter analyzes female images that predominantly appear in one or two saga genres but are less prevalent in others. Yet comparing and contrasting these images can illuminate aspects of them that have perhaps otherwise gone unnoticed, or not been articulated as clearly. By categorizing many characters under one heading, recurring (aspects of) female figures are highlighted, suggesting that they might have had more resonance with their audiences than others. Jenny Jochens has made a significant contribution in this direction, dividing human women in Old Norse–Icelandic secular texts into four subcategories: the Prophetess/Sorceress, the Warrior Woman, the Avenger, and the Whetter, each of whom served a separate literary function.²⁰ Jochens regards these figures as either fictional products of the male mind—fantasy or misogyny—or as reflecting a lost female culture suppressed by men.

Although there is much critical value in this model, influenced by the second-wave feminist agenda to identify and combat the ways in which patriarchal power structures oppress women, it also entails certain problems. Female characters that gain agency without stigma and thus do not fit into its paradigms of women—either as idealized shield-maidens or scapegoated victims of patriarchy—are largely excluded from the analysis, and thus their possible meanings are not accounted for. Moreover, although the characters assigned to the types in Jochens’s model might, broadly speaking, follow similar trajectories, saga authors, with their individual perspectives, do not always employ them with the same purpose, and the “same” female figure can have vastly different functions between texts. For example, one author can depict a subversive woman in a misogynistic or

didactic light, while another employs her subtly to critique the hegemonic social order. The classification into only four groups thus also runs the risk of erasing nuances between different representations; in this book, I explore, complicate, and add to the dominant female images discussed by Jochens and other critics.

Another advantage of the inclusive approach to texts is that it contributes to the increased breadth of knowledge about women in Old Norse–Icelandic literature and culture. Medieval Icelandic literature presents many intriguing characters but a limited selection of these has come to represent the standard image of “Old Norse Women” in previous scholarship, from which generalizations about women’s lived existence in Old Norse society as a whole have been made. The substantial debate about the female whetter—by now a critical cliché—reflects this, and many scholars have weighed in on the discussion as to her function and historicity. Some of the *Íslendingasögur*’s authors and audiences may have considered whetting an appropriate female role, while the near-total absence of the whetter in the large corpus of *fornaldarsögur*, which mainly depicts women advocating peace, is striking. It is almost equally striking that this fact has gone largely undiscussed. This omission is arguably a result of the tendency by scholars to devote disproportionate attention to characters that are the cause of, or at least contribute to, discord, physical aggression, and bloodshed.

This is a part of a broader propensity in Old Norse–Icelandic studies as a whole: a collection of “classical” *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur*, and verse, canonized by nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars, tends to be primarily preoccupied with these subjects, and these texts have until recently been privileged in scholarly debate. Texts that fall outside the canon—the majority of the corpus—were, if mentioned at all, used comparatively, and usually not studied in their own right, consequently producing partial or skewed conclusions. As an example, Carol J. Clover presents a compelling theory, which has garnered considerable critical influence, that medieval Icelandic society was a one-sex system based on a distinction between, on one end of the spectrum, powerful people—most men and the occasional woman—and, on the other, powerless people, who were most women, children, the elderly, the disabled, slaves, and disenfranchised men (owing to e.g., poverty or sickness).²¹ Clover argues, based on a small selection of female characters from the *Íslendingasögur* as well as legal and lexical evidence, that because these women, usually depicted as exceptional, are praised in the texts in masculine terms as “bold” or “brave,” the masculine ideal was the bar to which everyone was held. Although Clover’s analysis uncovers the way in which some parts of medieval society might have conceived of the relationship between

gender and power, as I will show in the following chapters, there are plenty of female characters in the saga corpus as a whole who are depicted as powerful and who are often admired for it without subsequently being compared to a man.

In order to develop an accurate and comprehensive picture of medieval Icelandic ideas about women, it is therefore necessary to examine all of the extant sources, and the dominant, but perhaps less arresting, images, as much as the exceptional and striking characters that Clover and other scholars analyze. In this book, I will investigate Old Norse–Icelandic secular prose texts assigned to many genres and composition periods.²² Analyzing what was actually being produced and consumed in the medieval period prompts a reconsideration of some of the assumptions that have been made about women in Old Norse–Icelandic literature and culture. This book focuses on several prominent heroines who are active and powerful but have been critically overlooked, and a more complex picture of women and their available roles than has previously been acknowledged will emerge. Such is the breadth and richness of female characters in Old Norse–Icelandic texts that unfortunately many of them will not be mentioned, but this study will interrogate and complicate the previous images of women, aiming to bring more of them to the forefront in scholarly discussion.

Women, Bodies, Words, and Power

This book is primarily concerned with the literary construction of the relationship between women and power in Old Norse–Icelandic sagas. Literary production is embedded in historical reality and discourse, encapsulating and communicating the ideologies of its sponsors. I here follow Simon Gaunt’s definition of ideology as “a discourse which is used (not necessarily consciously) by a society, culture or section of a society or culture to naturalize or undermine, for itself and/or others, power structures and inequalities within it.”²³ Scholars have tended to analyze the question of power in Old Norse–Icelandic literature either within the strict confines of blood feud, connecting it with women’s (in)ability to set in motion or perpetuate conflicts resulting in violence and death, or the legal system and the holding of public office: the official sphere exclusively open to men. This is not only an oversimplification of the complex relationships and events narrated in sagas, but it also overlooks the complex and diverse means with which female characters are able to affect the people and events in their world.

The theoretical model of power defined by the sociologist Max Weber in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (published in 1925) can help us to delineate the ideas and uses of power in the medieval sources. Weber

defines power (*Macht*) in the broadest sense as every imposition of a person's or group's will, in every conceivable range of situations within a "social relationship," regardless of what premises lie beneath this, or whether this imposition meets any opposition or not.²⁴ Weber developed the narrower concept *domination* (*Herrschaft*, also translated as "rule"): the probability that a specific person or group of people obey another party's explicit commands.²⁵ This kind of power does not have to be in any way socially sanctioned, but is based rather on the question of whether the agent (or group) has the *ability* to rule, that is, to realize their own will, and to implement their agendas and will.²⁶ Coercion may or may not be necessary to accomplish domination; force can be achieved not just with physical threat, but thanks to factors such as greater numbers or economic strength, which the dominated party in the relationship is unable to resist despite the lack of legal obligation.²⁷ However, the dominated person or group might also comply because they consider this to be in their best interest, based on a purely rational assessment of advantage, for example, political or economic. Conversely, obedience can be habitual; people obey commands without challenging them simply because they are used to so doing.²⁸ Using this theoretical model to define power as it is constructed in Old Norse-Icelandic literature helps us widen the scope of female characters that can be regarded as wielding it. Thus Weber's understanding of power informs the fundamental premises of this book and will be integrated throughout this book, regarding power as something achieved not just in women's active involvement in disputes, but in every case where a woman is portrayed as influencing a situation to her own will. This approach allows me to move beyond the previous scholarly debate to analyze a radically wider-ranging gallery of female characters than before.

The deciding factor by which all of the female characters appearing in this book are to a large extent defined and circumscribed is their body in that their available roles are determined by their sex (as, of course, men's are, too). The importance of the gendered body as a cultural construct is another premise that will be interwoven through the entire analysis. In (Western) patriarchal societies throughout history, gender hierarchies have existed at every social stratum and are the primary basis of social organization: a woman's position, whatever her class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, or religion, is usually first and foremost determined by her relationship to her male kin.²⁹ The result of gender hierarchy is the sexual division of labor, men's and women's unequal access to economic resources, and to formal power; as Gerda Lerner argues, the entire system of gender hierarchy has, since prehistory, depended on women's status as commodities to be exchanged between fathers and husbands, and between groups, a

function which in turn is based on their sexual and reproductive capacities.³⁰ Medieval Iceland was no exception: historically, high-ranking women in medieval Iceland seem to have had a clearly defined role and realm of power *innan stokks* “within the domestic sphere” as heads of households, symbolized by the bunch of keys hanging at their belt, and this position is often reflected in literary sources. The public sphere was the realm of (high-status) males: men took part in local and national assemblies, legislation, blood feud, travel, trade, and other business, where women had no official role.³¹ This, too, is visible in sagas, where women are shown as having restricted opportunities to participate in the sociopolitical and legal structures that affect their lives, and, especially in the *Íslendingasögur*, they occasionally express dissatisfaction and frustration with their lot, or subversively circumvent these structures in order to take control of events.

In this context, the primary tool available to women is words, and their other recourse is magic. Women speaking and wielding magic often differentiates them from men, as will be outlined in the first two chapters of this book. In a world that offers them little other opportunity to wield power, magic, explored in [chapter 2](#), emerges as a strategy for women attempting to achieve autonomy, uphold their own, their husband’s, or their family’s honor, ensure their livelihood and safety, and preserve their community. Moving beyond the question of the appropriateness and historicity of women’s whetting and lamenting explored in detail by scholars such as Clover, I use speech act theory to argue that women can use words to claim female subjectivity and autonomy.³² Speech act theory, developed by J. L. Austin and John Searle, provides the theoretical framework with which to regard words, when uttered by a speaker in a clearly defined context and with social sanction, as not just something one says, whether true or false, or the pronouncement of an opinion, but instead, as transforming a state of being; the words function as an “event” that the speaker *does*.³³ In the sagas, words spoken by a woman in a culturally specific, delimited situation, that is, blood feud, are sometimes presented as acceptable; outside of this legitimate context, however, they can function as a subversive maneuver. Thus the prevalent idea of the female whetter as the quintessential Old Norse–Icelandic female character is in need of review, so the book begins with a reconsideration of this figure, arguing in [chapter 1](#) that, by using speech acts as tools for empowerment, women can work within and manipulate existing power structures for their own ends.

Old Norse–Icelandic sagas present fascinating examples of female characters—shield-maidens and maiden-kings—breaking even further out of the confines of their gender by fighting with swords and

shields, sailing around the world with a retinue, and/or keeping a court, as a king would. In some cases, the woman takes a male name and enters a male identity, while maiden-kings are still gendered female but rule kingdoms until they eventually marry and lose sovereignty to their husbands. When examining these characters, the question of performativity is quick to rise, as they—temporarily, at least—are often no less successful, or even more so, than males, and often only turn to their traditionally female roles when they decide they have had enough of masculine activity (although in some cases this is forced upon them). Judith Butler's theories on the constructed subjectivities that exist within, and are produced by, regulative discourses, will prove helpful for analyzing what these impressive, yet profoundly unsettling, figures could have signified for a medieval audience.³⁴ Women appropriating and performing male roles—analyzed in [chapter 5](#)—transcend the boundaries between gender roles usually depicted as fixed and natural in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, and when read against the grain, they open up the provocative suggestion, and perhaps express the female fantasy, that male roles can be filled with members of either sex.³⁵

While maiden-kings and shield-maidens undermine the very idea that gender roles are natural, these images also appear in the discussion of sexuality: virginity and women's sexually pure behavior is foregrounded in late medieval romances, which also feature scenes of disturbing physical and sexual violence against independent women with the purpose of making them subservient. In the *fornaldarsögur*, we encounter gendered bodies—giantesses—that operate so far outside of social and sexual norms that they are rendered monstrous, and are also subjected to violence in many cases. It seems that these figures, delineated in [chapter 3](#), are used as vehicles to engage with every sort of alterity and taboo that is too far outside the realm of comfort to explore in other ways. Here, the giantess, an independent figure bursting with improprieties, sexually deviant tendencies, and physical aggression, appears as a threat to the hegemonic, enclosed, male self as it is constructed in medieval Icelandic texts. The theoretical tools with which to analyze monsters, developed by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Margrit Shildrick, can yield powerful insights into the multivalent meanings of the *fornaldarsögur*'s monstrous women, figures of duality that both disgust and provoke fear, and also attract. They function as sites where anxieties and fears of male powerlessness and vulnerability, as well as unspeakable desires of incestuous, interclass, or interracial sexual transgressions, are revealed.

Similar hints of tabooed sexuality is hinted at in some saga representations of the famous, even notorious, Norwegian queen Gunnhildr, a compelling, ambiguous figure—often demonized by

medieval authors—embodying power and sexual allure. However, in most cases, royal and aristocratic women are depicted in nonsexualized, positive, and admiring terms as elegant, wise, eloquent, persuasive figures who give sound advice, whether in fanciful or realistic accounts, discussed in [chapters 1 and 4](#) respectively. Here, Weber's definition of power is perhaps most useful in calling attention to the ways in which many of these women work within their legitimate role in the public sphere as consorts and counselors. Although they often seem to be motivated by benefitting these kings rather than themselves, they are sometimes shown as trying to achieve their own, separate agenda. Thus according to Old Norse–Icelandic sources, there is scope for women to gain some degree of power with social sanction in contexts other than household matters or blood feud.

Bodies, words, and power—the themes of this book—intersect in representations of female figures. Old Norse–Icelandic sources offer their audiences many different ideas of what it is to be female: presenting women of varying social and economic positions and racial origins. These women are often surprisingly powerful, and the ways in which they gain agency, whether by speech or actions, socially sanctioned or not, will be mapped out in the following chapters. My inclusive approach will demonstrate how varied and complex female characters are, how their depictions develop between texts, and how different genres of varying prestige that existed side by side, as well as individual texts within genres, offer different perspectives on the same problems. The book also moves beyond the crude dichotomy explored by many previous scholars of women in Old Norse–Icelandic literature of historical veracity versus masculine fantasy. Rather, I interrogate the construction of women's roles and their agency in the sagas, as well as the function of female characters in engaging with culturally contested issues. Employing productive theoretical frameworks that offer potential insights pertinent to each theme, I investigate such issues as the role of the body, showing how women's bodies become sites of violence in the struggle for power between social groups, and in constructing heteronormative behavior. Female rulers who strive to preserve their virginity suddenly become popular characters in the late-medieval period, suggesting that women's sexual behavior becomes a source of anxiety and in need of control; this is partly enforced by constructing privileged modes of conduct in literary texts. The sources consistently depict women's words as their main tool to achieve their agendas, whether their motivations are peaceful or destructive, socially sanctioned or illegitimate. Thus, with a retheorized approach to the concept of power and an inclusive approach to female images, the book shifts the attention to how

women negotiate their roles within the restraints of the hegemonic, patriarchal social order, and what happens when they transgress normative boundaries. In its analysis of the whole corpus of Old Norse–Icelandic secular saga literature, this book presents a groundbreaking new reading and understanding of gender roles in the different genres of literature so widely consumed by audiences in the medieval period.

A Note on Translations, Editions, and Orthography

All translations are mine unless otherwise stated. I have made use of scholarly, critical editions where possible, but unfortunately, many Old Norse–Icelandic texts have not been published in modern critical editions, and other editions are provisional.³⁶ Some editions I use date back to the nineteenth century—although many of them are excellent for their time, their editors often did not have access to all the primary manuscripts of their saga, and thus the critical apparatus can be limited. I have sometimes chosen to use Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson's more normalized and modernized edition of the *fornaldarsögur* rather than Carl C. Rafn's less altered text, which includes a modest textual apparatus, since the editors of the former state that they consulted more manuscripts than Rafn.³⁷

I have chosen to reproduce accurately quotes from texts in semidiplomatic editions as they stand, despite the irregularity in orthography and punctuation this inevitably entails. For similar reasons of accuracy, I do not Anglicize proper names of saga characters but keep them as they are printed in the editions.

CHAPTER 1

WOMEN SPEAKING

Brennu-Njáls saga is a canonical text traditionally regarded as the pinnacle of Icelandic saga literature, a saga that explores in depth the causes and results of bloodfeud. The main female characters, the unswervingly loyal Bergþóra, the femme fatale Hallgerðr, and the inciter Hildigunnr, are among the most striking in Old Norse–Icelandic literature and have come to define popular perceptions of women and their attributes in Icelandic sagas. Judging from these characters, and the critical discourse that centers on them, it seems that goading others to violence and revenge is what women in the sagas *do*. Indeed the quasi-proverbial phrase *köld eru kvenna ráð* “cold are the counsels of women” appears after one famous incitement scene, an expression often regarded as capturing a key feature of the ideology of medieval Icelandic society.¹

The *hvöt* “incitement speech”—women’s primary device of involving themselves in men’s affairs as depicted in a canonical group of *Íslendingasögur* and eddic poetry—has been scrutinized in detail by scholars.² We may wonder what is at stake for both parties, the inciter and the object of her speech: On the one hand, given the risks involved, that is, retaliation taken on their own kinsmen, or losing honor should the avenger be unsuccessful, why do women engage in the whetting process? Whose agency is at work, that of the inciter, or the recipient of her speech? Is the female inciter’s motivation always that of maintaining family reputation and performing a role expected or demanded of her, or can an independent female agenda be uncovered that potentially opens up space for using the incitement speech subversively and outside the traditional context?

In previous critical discussions about female characters in Old Norse–Icelandic literature, these questions have often been inextricably tied to whether or not the female inciter wields power by her goading. However, “power” as a fundamental concept, as it has been applied in modern scholarship, has gone largely undefined and unquestioned.³ Does power simply equal the aggressive imposition of one’s will? This understanding of the term, drawing a link between power and violence, seems to be the basis for most critics’ understanding of the female inciter as having agency, exemplified in Else Mundal’s words that the “impression of strong and independent

women in Old Norse society depends very heavily on a literary motif, the goading scene.”⁴ This statement implies that if we conjecture that the female inciter existed in reality, women must have had some degree of power in the medieval period; simultaneously, it does not consider the possibility that women could be strong and independent in other contexts. However, this line of argument does not allow for other dimensions and forms of power, such as the ability to keep the community unified, harmonious, and prosperous rather than feuding and violent, and it eliminates from the debate ideologies other than the honor-based value system privileged in some, though not all, sagas. In fact, as I will discuss later, the word *eggja* “to incite” also occurs in a context where a woman urges her husband not to use weapons against someone but rather to act prudently and form an alliance with another man, thereby diminishing the likelihood of feud. Moreover, male characters who use (or attempt to use) methods other than blood vengeance to settle conflict, are often depicted positively.⁵ It seems appropriate, therefore, to look at the women who do so.

As mentioned in the introduction, the often narrow scope of texts considered in critical discussion of Old Norse women has produced skewed results. Because of the notion of power as an aggressive force, research on “powerful” women in Old Norse literature has tended to focus only on the sagas that contain many female inciters, in addition to individual goading scenes from lesser-known texts. Yet the conclusions drawn from these investigations are often represented as applying to female roles and images of women in “the sagas” as a whole.⁶ This methodology effectively ignores the many other representations of women, who, although not inciting vengeance or violence, I will argue, can be seen as active and carry agency. In the second part of the chapter, I shall look at a counterimage to the female inciter: wise women dispensing peaceful advice, employing their words to prevent rather than perpetuate feud, warfare, or violence. The pacific type of female character, pervasive in the *fornaldarsögur* but certainly to be found in the *Íslendingasögur* and other genres, has gone almost entirely unnoticed. The form of women’s speech found in these examples is socially sanctioned and positively coded in an unambiguous way; the female speaker here functions a useful mouthpiece for socially cohesive values also emphasized in wisdom poetry.

Disastrous Words

Whetting: The Pattern

There are a number of famous incitement scenes in the sagas, the most elaborate of which appears in *Brennu-Njáls saga*. In this episode, which

has remained central in critical analysis, especially in several detailed studies from the 1980s and '90s, Hildigunnr, a woman of high social standing, urges her uncle, the chieftain Flosi, to avenge her husband Hǫskuldr Njálsson, a charge to which he angrily responds with the jibe “kǫld eru kvenna ráð” [cold are the counsels of women] but nevertheless, he acts on her words.⁷ Although the proverb is not as widespread as the common perception seems to be (according to Richard L. Harris, it appears only three times in the corpus of all saga literature), it memorably verbalizes many men’s reluctance to avenge and their negative attitude toward the women who incite them to take physical action.⁸ Rolf Heller identifies 51 women as inciters in the *Íslendingasögur*, arguing that they represent a literary motif borrowed from text to text; the exact number can be debated—Jochens and Miller have added new characters to Heller’s list—but inciters clearly appear frequently throughout the corpus.⁹ In this section, I seek to understand the female inciter not just in terms of the debate about her historicity or constructed and literary nature, but also in the context of power, which in its broadest definition can be defined as any imposition of one party’s will on another party, by any means conceivable, whether opposed or not.¹⁰

The hallmarks of the traditional whetting scene have been described and analyzed in detail by many scholars. Sometimes the words of the incitement are not reported—the saga author simply states that a certain character incited (*eggja*, *hvetja*, *frýja*) someone else—but the general pattern is as follows: someone offends a man by questioning his masculinity in some way, for example, by accusations of cowardice, lack of manliness, or passive homosexuality, by injuring him, or by killing a close relation.¹¹ This is often part of a power struggle for political domination of a particular region. The man whose duty it is to respond is, in his proud kinswoman’s view, slow to act. She emphatically insists on him taking up weapons by deploying one or more of the following strategies: lamenting the slain, producing a bloody token of the deceased, goading the man to violence, and shaming him by verbal utterances. These utterances may include reminding him of his kin obligation, accusing him of cowardice, comparing him to a woman, or threatening to take up weapons, and thus the male role, if he does not act. As Carol J. Clover has shown, many women choose a mealtime as the opportune moment to incite; this is the one occasion where they have direct and, most importantly, public access to the man in their own space within the household.¹² A representative example of the language used in incitement speeches can be found in *Þórðar saga kakala*, a *samtíðarsaga* written only a few years or decades after the turbulent events it relates took place in the mid-thirteenth century, but this formulaic speech could equally appear

in an *Íslendingasaga*.¹³ Here, the aristocratic Steinvör, whose brother Þórðr is involved in warfare with another powerful magnate, incites her husband Hálfðan, a model of male passivity and reluctance, to help her brother:

“hefi ek hann ok sjaldan eggjat at ganga í stórmæli, en nú mun ek þat bert gera, at lítit mun verða okkart samþykki, ef þú veitir eigi Þórði, bróður mínum. Mun þá svá fara, sem minnr er at sköpuðu, at ek mun taka vápnin ok vita, ef nökkurir menn vili fylgja mér, en ek mun fá þér af hendi búrluklana.” Var Steinvör þá málóð um hríð, en Hálfðan þagði ok hlýddi til.¹⁴

[“I have rarely incited him to involve himself in grave affairs, but now I will make it plain that there will be no concord between us if you do not support my brother Þórðr. Otherwise the result might be, although it is against my nature, that I will take the weapons and see if anyone will follow me, but I will hand the keys to the pantry over to you.” Steinvör went on for a while, but Hálfðan remained silent and listened.]

As the term *stórmæli* “important or grave affairs” indicates, by this speech Steinvör indirectly involves herself in the male arena of politics, insisting that her husband support her brother Þórðr in his feuding. By Steinvör’s own admission, her speech is an incitement, but by declaring that she has rarely employed such methods before, the narrative suggests that whetting should only be employed for good reason. Steinvör—in the Brynhildian tradition—threatens her husband with divorce, and she also makes a serious accusation about his inadequate masculinity, stating that she will take over his role and give him the keys to the pantry.¹⁵ This evokes Þórr’s comic masquerade as Freyja in the eddic poem *Brymskviða*, where he wears female clothing, her necklace, the Brisingamen, and has keys hanging from the waist, a female symbol representing the mistress’s authority *innan stokks* “in the domestic sphere.”¹⁶ The comment that Steinvör is *málóð* “ranting” evokes the phrase “láta ganga af kappi” [to press on forcefully], which appears in the same context of women encouraging men to act, and could indicate a heightened emotional state, and excessive, perhaps incoherent, speech.¹⁷ Finally, as the words “nú mun ek þat bert gera” [I will now make it known openly] imply, the incitement is often performed in front of an audience, where other household members are witnesses. This setting indicates that the woman deliberately makes the incitement a public matter because it has a different effect from speaking to the husband in private; if the man is to keep his honor following the incitement, he must take action.

This type of heightened speech or utterance can thus be seen as formal speech act that prompts men to react in a certain way. According to J. L. Austin’s definition, speech acts are words that are not a statement of facts, or the pronouncement of an opinion, but instead, they transform a state of being such as a person’s status, or the relationship between parties. A verbal utterance that is thereby an

act: saying is doing.¹⁸ Speech acts that fulfill certain conditions involve the existence of a so-called illocutionary force behind the utterance that binds the speaker to it.¹⁹ Speakers must be qualified to perform the speech act (e.g., by virtue of their legitimate authority or social status), and second, the speech act must have been heard and understood by someone; if these conditions are not fulfilled it may be considered void. This understanding underpins Elaine Tennant's definition of the performative as a culturally conditioned act that is understood as such if it follows conventions to a sufficient extent for members of the community to recognize it.²⁰ Thus by evoking the formulaic aspects of incitement speeches outlined here, in certain contexts, a woman can be sure that her words and their illocutionary force will have a pronounced effect on their recipient, likewise compelling him to take action.

The incitement speech is a double-edged sword, resulting in the loss of the speaker's own kinsmen, and the woman often ends up being a scapegoat for their death.²¹ Also, by taking revenge, not only would the man be risking his own life and inviting retaliation on his kin group, but he is often reluctant to use force against a man with whom he may have strong homosocial bonds. Thus, following the speech, the recipient sometimes becomes angry and reproaches the woman, but in most cases the man is nevertheless persuaded to execute her wish. Sometimes the subsequent killing scene involves pathos, so that the whetting woman appears in an even crueler light; in *Laxdæla saga* pathos is evoked by Bolli, the killer, holding the dying Kjartan, his sworn brother, in his arms.²² However, our reading of the motif is imbued with ambivalence. Did a woman really have the power to force a man to take revenge so that he was unable to refuse, under the threat of being deemed unmanly, and had no choice but to "obey," even if he were unwilling? Or does one man's angry refusal to be his wife's *eggjanarfífl* "goading-fool" imply that men who acted on their female kin's whetting were socially regarded as fools, manipulated by women cleverer than them? And if so, to what extent is the inciter culpable for the avenger's deed?

The Female Inciter

There are two opposite schools of thought as to how much the female inciter is a reflection of medieval reality: at one end of the spectrum there are those who consider the female inciter purely a literary construct with no historical basis, imaginative creations by misogynous medieval authors who made her the scapegoat of men's violent deeds.²³ At the other end are scholars who believe she reflects a real, historical role for women, approved by the hegemonic social order. Thus the representations of women who incite men to revenge

would show that women were empowered in this respect in Iceland in the medieval period and were at least partly allowed to partake in affairs outside of the domestic sphere.²⁴

Although it is possible that, historically, women in medieval Iceland (and Scandinavia), particularly those of high social standing, engaged in whetting when they regarded it necessary, the female inciter motif as it appears in Old Norse literature may also be a literary vehicle. One of its functions could be to convey social sanctioning of male violence; thus the incitement speech of a lowly female servant in *Hrafnkels saga* can surely not have been understood by the society within the world of the saga to have any effect on the recipient, Hrafnkell, in a formal, legal sense (as opposed to the same speech had it been uttered by his wife), and thus the conditions of her speech act, if it is so intended, are not fulfilled.²⁵ Rather, the servant can be seen as the voice of the community, expressing public opinion, preemptively approving Hrafnkell's deeds before he takes action against Eyvindr.

Interpretations based on the idea of women's connection with the past and the subconscious have proved productive in moving the discussion beyond the polarized debate of historicity versus literary qualities. Carolyn Anderson describes in Lacanian terms the dichotomy in *Brennu-Njáls saga* between bloodfeud and law, and feminine and masculine roles, as revealing anxieties over the male propensity to violence in response to offense.²⁶ In Anderson's interpretation, "[w]omen become the sign of pre-legal violence, in a form of a return to the Imaginary, while the men are associated with the entry into the Symbolic that attends the successful operation of universalizing, kin-blind law."²⁷ However, there is not a seamless transition from one area to another, and thus Hildigunnr forces Flosi to return to the Imaginary, the sphere to which blood vengeance has been relegated or made abject by men.²⁸ Yet in some episodes, men *do* behave as "savages," insisting on blood vengeance and refusing peace offerings, rupturing the boundaries that the narrative attempts to construct between the two gender identities, suggesting that gender is an instable category, and the entry into the Symbolic order is never complete.²⁹ Anderson's analysis identifies female inciters as revealing not historical facts but universal psychological anxieties that become manifest in the figure.

In a similar vein, Zoe Borovsky argues that after the fall of the Icelandic Commonwealth, medieval authors used the female inciter as a way of evoking values they admired on some level but that were no longer seen as acceptable. By associating the incitement speech with the pagan and heroic past, the "potential disruption of or threat to the present symbolic order"—Norwegian monarchical rule and a new

legal system based on punishment in the name of the king, executed by his representatives—could be downplayed.³⁰ For both critics, the female inciter is a literary phenomenon that reflects real fears, a mechanism to explore specific kinds of violence related to vengeance. Many saga authors' ambivalence toward the incitement speech suggests that some part of them, and their society, sanctions violence, but ultimately they are aware that in the new social order, it must be rejected and repressed, either back into the past or into the subconscious. Indeed, Gísli's expression of regret when his sister Þórdís fails to act in the spirit of the women of heroic legend underlines the growing recognition in thirteenth-century saga literature, including *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, that eddic female characters were no longer viable role models for Icelandic women, any more than uncompromising heroes such as Gísli were exemplary figures for Icelandic men.³¹

Whatever the narrator's attitude to the whetting woman, and whatever her historicity, the figure is demonstrably active and powerful within the narrative: she is the catalyst for or driving force behind feuds, and her speech thus has the effect of an act in Austinean terms because her words function as an "event"; they demand a response by the recipient if he intends to keep his honor intact. These women are not passive victims of fate, but as they cannot physically achieve (or attempt to achieve) their will, they compel their husbands or male kin to act by goading them. However, incitement speeches occasionally fail. When Hallgerðr incites her husband Gunnarr to avenge Bergþóra's attack on her honor in a squabble over seating arrangements in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, he replies: "Heim mun ek fara, ok er þat makligast, at þú sennir við heimamenn þína, en eigi í annarra manna híbýlum, enda á ek Njáli marga sömð at launa, ok mun ek ekki vera eggjanarfífl þitt" [I will go back home and it would be more fitting if you quarrelled with members of your own household rather than in other people's homes; I owe Njáll a great deal of honor and I will not be your goading-fool].³² Gunnarr's reply and refusal to be an *eggjanarfífl* "goading fool," that is, to comply with his wife's speech act, is unusual for a man being incited. He clearly considers his wife's demand that *her* honor be upheld as beyond the boundaries of acceptable behavior; owing to Hallgerðr's separate agenda, her incitement and its failure might be seen as another instance where the conditions of the speech act are violated.

Despite Hallgerðr's failure, the exchange between her and Gunnarr seems to suggest that in some instances, women could be seen as manipulating the incitement speech purely for their own ends. Two men who can possibly be seen as the pawns of a woman appear in *Guðmundar saga dýra*, a *samtíðarsaga* relating events that took place in

the late twelfth century. In a brief episode, a young woman, Heiðar-Gróa, is courted by a local man named Böðvarr, but she is not interested. She persuades her cousin Þorsteinn and Beini, another man who frequently visits her but toward whom she is much better disposed, to kill Böðvarr; the audience does not find out what words she spoke to persuade Þorsteinn since the saga simply relates that “töluðu þau Gróa stund þá” [he and Gróa spoke for a while], but after this conversation the two men ambush and kill Böðvarr.³³ In this episode a female character uses her words to persuade men to carry out her own agenda; although one of them probably has his own individual motive and wants the woman for himself, as the instigator, Gróa is subtly depicted as at least partly responsible for the killing of her unwanted suitor.

An example from the *Íslendingasaga Fóstbræðra saga* shows how women could use goading to benefit the community as well as themselves.³⁴ The two protagonists Þormóðr and Þorgeirr fancy themselves to be following in the footsteps of the great heroes of the past, much to the displeasure of most other people in the peaceful agrarian society in which they live. On one of their exploits, they stay with Sigrfljóð, a popular and wise widow who lives in a certain area of the West Fjords region in Northwest Iceland. She has had trouble dealing with her neighbors, a father and son who go around looting and threatening people, and when the two sworn brothers seek shelter with her from a raging storm, Sigrfljóð instantly sees an opportunity to rid herself of these thugs. She initially tries to ask Þorgeirr and Þormóðr to help her, but they are more wary than she expects, apprehensive because the culprits are the friends of the local chieftain Vermundr. The widow decides that more forceful words are needed and replies: “At því kómr nú, sem mælt er, at spyrja er bezt til váligra þegna. Þér þykkizk vera garpar miklir, þá er þér eruð í þeim veg at kúga kotunga, en hræðizk þegar, er í mannraunir kómr.” [It is now confirmed, as is said, that it is better to know malevolent men only by reputation. You pretend to be warlike when you are cowing peasants, but become afraid when you face trials of manliness.]³⁵ This challenge to their masculinity has the intended effect, and they rush off to do as Sigrfljóð tells them. Judging from the saga, Þorgeirr and Þormóðr seem to have been well-known all over the West Fjords, and the locals, including Sigrfljóð, seem to have understood the codes on which they modeled themselves; thus she could be described as resourceful, cunning, or even opportunist depending on the perspective. Sigrfljóð’s plan works, and the two self-appointed heroes kill the father and son. There is clearly no question of slighted honor between the sworn brothers and those they kill. It is rather the case that Sigrfljóð cleverly employs the one accusation to which Þorgeirr,

in particular, must instantly respond, a challenge to his courage and masculinity; it is no coincidence that such a charge is one of the main components of the incitement speech.

As Helga Kress has noted, according to the social norms of the *Íslendingasögur*, the locals should have been able to depend on their leader, Vermundr, to rid the area of nuisances and destabilizing elements like Sigrfljóð's neighbors, but he fails as chieftain and is compliant in their violent behavior.³⁶ The saga seems to be critical of his corrupt rulership, as Sigrfljóð's words to Vermundr suggest:

þat munu sumir menn mæla, at þeir [fóstbræður] hafi eigi þessa menn fyrir yðr drepit, heldr má hinn veg at kveða, at þeir hafi þessi víg fyrir yðr unnit. En hverr skal hegna ósiðu, rán eða hernað, ef eigi vilið þér, er stjórnarmenn eru kallaðir heraða? Sýnisk oss, at þeir Þorgeirr ok Þormóðr hafi þat unit, er þér skylduð gort hafa eða láta gera, ok mun yðr svá sýnask sem ek segi, ef yðr gefr eigi missýni í þessu máli.³⁷

[Some will say that they (the sworn brothers) did not kill your men, rather that they did these killings for you. But who should punish anti-social behavior, plundering, and robbery, if you, who are called the rulers of this area, will not? It seems to me that Þorgeirr and Þormóðr have achieved what you should have done or had done, and you would agree with me were you not blind to this matter.]

Sigrfljóð astonishingly reproaches Vermundr for not fulfilling his duties as the leader of the community and allowing his friends to behave violently and dishonorably, claiming that the sworn brothers have in fact done what he ought to have taken upon himself. At first, Vermundr is unhappy about the whole situation, but she pays him a fee in return for leaving Þorgeirr and Þormóðr in peace, a bribe that considerably raises his spirits and shows exactly what an amoral, corrupt man he is.

This example clearly demonstrates how a female character can be shown to use aspects of the incitement speech act to manipulate men; here, the illocutionary force is identical to that in the traditional setting, but once again, conditions regarding the speaker do not seem to be fulfilled, since Sigrfljóð and the sworn brothers are not in any way related. However, Sigrfljóð's actions are shown to serve a social good; they benefit the community and are portrayed as justified despite the fact that she effectively appropriates Vermundr's role.³⁸ Thus whetting can be employed subversively by women to persuade men to do their will, if they are, as Þorgeirr and Þormóðr are, malleable or foolish enough to take the bait.

In the above examples, whetting does not take place in the traditional context; the objects of the incitement speech have not been personally injured or offended, and often the inciter is not legitimately performing the speech act. Rather, the reason for whetting is that the woman has some personal agenda that she wants the man/men to carry out for her, and this question of women's lack of subservience appears more widely in the *Íslendingasögur*. In Hildigunnr's much-

quoted incitement of Flosi, he in fact emphasizes her will: “Eigi skortir þik grimmleik, ok sét er, hvat þú vill . . . Þú ert it mesta forað ok vildir, at vér tækim þat upp, er öllum oss gegnir verst.” [You are in no short supply of grimness, and it is clear what you want . . . You are a monster and want us to choose the option which will serve us all badly.]³⁹ In *Laxdæla saga*, the feud in the saga is really perpetuated not between two men, but between Kjartan and Guðrún—not Bolli—and it is *her* pride and honor that he intends to wound, rather than Bolli’s, when he blocks their farm’s exits (including those to the toilet) for three days, in revenge for the theft of a magnificent headdress he had received as a royal gift, probably stolen by Guðrún. This shameful offense provokes Guðrún’s uncontrollable rage and her decision to have Kjartan attacked by inciting both her brothers and Bolli, Kjartan’s sworn brother. Yet another male-female struggle of dominance is depicted in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, here between Egill and Queen Gunnhildr; King Eiríkr, Gunnhildr’s husband, features as a secondary and subordinate character whom she continually goads against Egill. In fact, Gunnhildr is arguably Egill’s most difficult adversary in the saga, and although she never succeeds in having him killed, she still makes life difficult for him at times. The motivation for all these women’s incitements deviates from the more traditional feuding pattern, being driven by a female insistence on maintaining her own honor and status, independent of her husband or male kin.

The role of the female inciter is much more complex than most scholars allow, and cannot be considered under a single heading. Different characters have different aspects; some are not motivated by the honor of the family, but are more self-centered. Like the archetypal Brynhildr from heroic legend, they insist on upholding their personal honor at any cost.⁴⁰ Other women such as Sigrfljóð, find that incitement is a powerful vehicle to manipulate imprudent young men. Whetting as well as bribery appear as tools for an independent widow who has no male kin to act on her own behalf to help her improve her life and the safety and cohesion of the community. There is room for maneuver for the female inciter to serve her own ends. The whetting woman operates sometimes as a literary device to express social sanction for male actions, but in some cases she gains agency by using her verbal power; the man’s honor, masculinity, and social status, everything from which *his* power is derived in the dominant order, is attacked and undermined through language. The female whetter is indeed here constructed as a speaking subject, appropriating the normatively male subject position, asserting her autonomy and dominance over the man. Rather than accepting the role of passive victim of men’s feuding and power struggles, the female inciter uses words that function as speech acts to empower

herself to participate in the male sphere.

Wise Words

The female inciter is the most prominent Old Norse female stereotype; in the second part of this chapter, her less discussed counterimage, the wise woman, who advocates peace rather than violence, will be explored. So pervasive is this figure in the *fornaldarsögur* that she is arguably a stereotype associated with that genre. The wise woman's characteristics and attributes have hitherto not been systematically documented, so I will begin by reviewing them, and then analyzing the content and function of her advice. Although women's wisdom and sound counsel are pervasive throughout these sagas, I will focus on *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, a sophisticated saga whose evident didactic program is to depict women as wise counselors dispensing socially cohesive advice.⁴¹ Wise women are impressive, but unlike the whetter, they are rarely motivated by their own individual agendas or sense of honor, and they keep within the limits of a more traditional, socially conformist female image. Their pacific and prudent advice has positive results; these conservative female figures convey words of wisdom that benefit their husbands and kingdom, and, ultimately, the audience.

Women, Wisdom, and Counsel

The association of women with wisdom and good counsel is pervasive in Old Norse-Icelandic literary sources. Unnr *djúpúðga* “the deep-minded” in *Laxdæla saga* is, as her epithet and description as *afbragð annarra kvenna* “the superior of every woman” indicates, portrayed as a woman of outstanding wisdom, advising her deferential family members on various matters until her death of old age.⁴² Brynhildr is also exceptionally wise; this is stressed throughout *Völsunga saga*, where Sigurðr the dragon slayer at one point declares her to be the wisest woman in the world, and in the eddic poem *Sigrdrífumál* the valkyrie Sigrdrífa, provides Sigurðr with the important gnomic wisdom and rune knowledge that all heroes require.⁴³ The gnomic eddic poem *Hávamál* portrays women as *horskar* “wise” when it advises men on how to seduce them by flattery and deception: “þá vér fegrst mælom, er vér flást hyggjom, / þat tælir horsca hugi” [when we speak most fairly, then we think most falsely, / that entraps the wise mind]; the unnamed Billings mæi “Billings’s girl,” described with epithets such as *þá ráðspaka* “sagacious woman” and *it horsca man* “the wise girl,” shows wisdom, tact, and resourcefulness in eluding Óðinn’s advances.⁴⁴ Thus there is an attested tradition of associating women with wisdom and advice in Old Norse-Icelandic literature.

In the *fornaldarsögur*, the predominant human female characters are royal women: princesses (or in some cases aristocratic women) who are normally married off in the course of the narrative, and queens, whose role often seems to be an advisory one. These women are often both beautiful and wise, but usually at least wise; the common phrase used to describe them in the *fornaldarsögur* is *væn ok vitr* “beautiful/promising and wise” or variants of *vit*.⁴⁵ The same formula also appears in the *Íslendingasögur*, albeit less frequently. On the one hand, the phrase *væn ok vitr* seems conventional and generic, and the woman’s wisdom is often not depicted in the narrative. On the other, it is noteworthy that it is such a recurrent phrase; medieval audiences probably valued these qualities in women.

The most important female virtues in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* are explicitly stated to be prudence and foresight. When Ketill urges his younger brother, the more outstanding Hrólfr, to find a wife and marry, his suggested requirements for the woman’s qualities are twofold:

Þú ert maðr ókvænt, ok mundir þú þykkja miklu gildari konungr, ef þú fengir þér kvánfang við þitt hæfi . . . Þá mundi yðar sæmd vaxa, ef þér bæðið þeirar konungsdóttur, er bæði er hygginn ok forsjál.⁴⁶

[You are an unmarried man, and you would be considered a much more powerful king if you find a suitable wife . . . Your honor would prosper if you propose to a princess who has both prudence and foresight.]

The bride must be of royal birth, and be prudent and possessed of foresight, suggesting a queen’s vital role as the king’s wise counselor. In an earlier section of the saga, King Hringr’s wife advises her husband against waging war on his friend, King Gautrekr, mentioning the fact that Gautrekr has recently acquired a wise and excellent wife as one of the arguments in favor of keeping the peace: “Hefir hann fengit svá vitra konu ok góðfúsa, at allan ykkarn félagsskap mun hún saman draga ok í lag færa þat, sem áfátt er.” [He has acquired such a wise and benevolent wife, that she will bring you back together and put right what has gone amiss in your friendship.]⁴⁷ When Þornbjörg relinquishes her status as a maiden-king and marries Hrólfr, the narrator notes that among many other things, she is “vit ok vinsæl, málsnjöll ok spakráðug” [wise and beloved by many, eloquent and wise of counsel].⁴⁸ It is striking that traditional female virtues such as beauty are nowhere mentioned; noble lineage and intelligence are the only criteria against which a prospective wife is to be measured, and eloquence and sound counsel is admired and praised. As it turns out, female wisdom continues to be held in esteem: the prominent women in the saga are all wise, and all play an important part in their husbands’ lives, often preventing them from acting rashly and foolishly.

Most importantly, women are expected to share their wisdom, and men sometimes actively seek their counsel: dispensing prudent advice is a socially sanctioned female gender role. This is explicitly stated in *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*: when Hervör tries to dissuade Hjalþér from the dangerous mission of going to her father's court, he replies: "Hví hrekr þú mik, / Hervör, í orðum? / Væri heldr nær / vífi skæru / at vera horskum dreng / holl í ráðum." [Why do you deter me, Hervör? It would be more fitting of the bright woman to give the wise and bold man wholesome counsel.]⁴⁹ Women's advice is not listed in a catalogue in the manner of the eddic poems, but is rather tailored to situations in which specific problems arise; thus it apparently has an ad hoc quality.⁵⁰ However, certain universal themes emerge from this advice, themes which can arguably be found elsewhere in medieval Icelandic wisdom poetry such as *Hugsvinnsmál*, an Old Norse-Icelandic translation of the Latin gnomic poem *Disticha Catonis*, as well as the more famous eddic *Hávamál*, which values women as faithful confidantes, *eyrarúna* "a friend into whose ears secrets are confided."⁵¹ Equally, wisdom is a chief virtue in the courtly literature that was brought to Scandinavia and Iceland in the thirteenth century. These themes, echoing the advice found in wisdom poetry and thus reflecting wider cultural values, center on social conduct, for example, loyalty, upholding oaths, and showing hospitality, and they stress prudence and moderation.

Types of Female Wisdom

Resourcefulness

One of the ways in which wisdom is manifested in female characters is in their independence and resourcefulness. Women negotiate various perils with skill and tact and rely on their wits rather than physical strength or working through male kin to achieve their aims. For example, the two Irish princesses of *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* and *Örvar-Odds saga* take the initiative in navigating difficult situations, to their own and the hero's satisfaction. When the invading army of Hrólfr and his men is defeated by the Irish king, the princess Ingibjörg, described as "vitr ok vinsæl ok harðla væn ok kurteis" [wise and beloved and exceedingly beautiful and courteous] provides Hrólfr and his friends with various supplies as well as his sword in their dungeon.⁵² She then dispatches her lady-in-waiting to seek out Þórir in order to help free Hrólfr. After this is successfully carried out, the princess trades amnesty for her father, the king, in return for her help. Ingibjörg is a pivotal character in this episode, whose measures ensure the safety of the protagonist and his companions.

Similarly ingenious, Ölvör, also an Irish princess, manages by her powers of persuasion to convince Örvar-Oddr (the eponymous hero of

the saga) not to do her harm (for it can be assumed that he has only sexual conquest in mind when he pulls her out of her hiding place on their first encounter). She has foreknowledge of who Oddr is and understands that he cannot, according to the code of ethics he has agreed to follow, abduct her. Bribing him with money in exchange for her freedom proves to be futile, but the offer of a magic shirt which will protect him in battle and against various other perils, to be ready in one year's time, persuades Oddr to let her go. This agreement is followed through, and eventually they marry and have a daughter.⁵³ The marriage does not last, but the shirt repeatedly saves Oddr from death; its protective powers that envelop Oddr seem to be linked with its female origins or qualities, in contrast with his enemy Ögmundr's phallic sword that fails to penetrate it. It is striking that women are usually the purveyors and in some cases the makers of magical objects that help the hero on his quest, such as impenetrable clothing and armor, enchanted weapons, rings, and tents, and other objects that are useful to the recipient.⁵⁴ As Carolynne Larrington outlines, Arthurian legend contains similar elements; women frequently bestow magical objects such as swords, cloaks, boats, and shields to male heroes, and, as in Ölvör's case, these objects are often of their own creation.⁵⁵ This saga motif could derive from Continental romance; moreover, it connects to other female accomplishments and mental qualities, discussed next.

As can be seen from the examples discussed, women who are resourceful, independent, and active, and who venture out of a traditional passive female role, are not stigmatized. Marianne Kalinke argues that the princess Ingibjörg undermines her father's authority; indeed, although she prevents his killing by Hrólfr, she is certainly no meek and dutiful daughter.⁵⁶ However, because it is Hrólfr rather than the Irish king who has the audience's sympathy and is the saga's protagonist, her behavior is depicted as clever and beneficial, not transgressive. The motif of the independent princess engages with the question of women's allegiance either to birth family or husband; it surfaces in many Old Norse-Icelandic texts, especially in the eddic heroine Guðrún Gjúkadóttir's predicament, where she is torn between being loyal to her husband or her brothers.⁵⁷ In *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, this question is dealt with less ambivalently than in some other texts: here the hegemonic view is that a woman's loyalty needs to shift from her father to her spouse. Ingibjörg's apparent independence and subversion of her traditional role is not so shocking in this light. Thus women are allowed to be wise, independent, and resourceful, and they are often admired for it, on the condition that their agency benefit the male protagonist and not negate his masculine supremacy in terms of physical strength, prowess, and

courage in the narrative.

Innate Intelligence

Women in the *fornaldarsögur* can be skilled negotiators and sometimes use resources such as magic objects (often of their own creation) to reach their ends. Women also engage in activities that show their intelligence, and some of them possess academic learning. Since wisdom and women are commonly collocated in the *fornaldarsögur*—wisdom is seen as a particularly innate female quality—it is important to distinguish between mental aptitude on the one hand, and what can be referred to as *íþróttir*, that is, accomplishments, acquired skills that entail training, on the other.⁵⁸

Foresight, an intellectual quality that combines innate wisdom and learning from experience, is one of the most valued female attributes in some sagas. In the first bridal-quest episode of *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, two kings woo the bride, Ingibjörg: the aging Gautrekr and the strapping young Ólafr. Her father allows her to choose her suitor to marry, and Ingibjörg, in a long monologue, first takes care to flatter both men but then goes on to explain her reasons for choosing the older suitor by means of a metaphor, comparing the younger king to an apple tree with great potential of producing a good crop, but not yet attested.⁵⁹ King Gautrekr, however, is like an apple tree in full bloom; it has plenty of branches and has already borne many kinds of apples, or in other words, he has already proven himself a distinguished ruler and is therefore the more reliable option.⁶⁰ Ingibjörg's decision demonstrates her *forsjálni* “foresight” and proves felicitous; Ólafr is outraged at his rejection and attacks Gautrekr, who boldly kills his aggressor along with his entire force, showing his superiority despite his age. Thus from the very beginning of the saga, the narrator establishes that female characters possess mental qualities that allow them to identify and advocate the most prudent course of action; this female attribute is then reaffirmed many times later on. In *Hrólfs saga*, Ingibjörg's foresight in picking Gautrekr as her husband results in the continuation of his lineage and the birth of the saga's outstanding hero, Hrólf.

Another inherent intellectual quality attributed to women relates to the realm of dreams: having premonitory dreams and/or being able to interpret these. Ingigerðr, another queen in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, is introduced in terms of this capability: “[Eirekr] átti sér drottningu vitra ok væna. Hún hendi mikit tal af draumum.” [Eiríkr had a queen who was wise and beautiful. She was interested in discussing dreams.]⁶¹ Women dream of attacks on their courts, the death of certain individuals, the arrival of strangers, and people's character or inherent qualities, usually represented by animals (*fylgjur*). For

example, Princess Ingibjörg in *Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra* has a premonitory dream about vicious wolves and foxes attacking from the sea; this turns out to be a warning that an attack from malevolent Vikings is imminent.⁶² Sometimes dreams are ominously clear: Brynhildr predicts the tragic course of events of *Völsunga saga* after Guðrún relates her dream of the two women's struggle over the stag with a golden pelt, and, despite telling her husband Gunnarr of her violent and foreboding dreams, Glaumvör does not manage to prevent her husband and his brother Högni from marching to their death at Atli's court.⁶³ Similarly, Jörunn, the wise wife of Án in *Áns saga bogsveigis*, repeatedly represents the voice of caution in the saga, and when Án dreams that his brother Þórir has been killed, she encourages him to take stock in the dream, which proves to be sound advice.⁶⁴ Dreams and their interpretation are a literary device strongly linked with women, and prove valid in the warnings they offer.

Learning and Íþróttir

As well as these innate female qualities, excellence in various *íþróttir*, acquired skill, denotes women's intelligence. In both Old Norse-Icelandic and Old English of different genres, men of high social standing were traditionally expected to possess not only certain attributes such as physical strength and athletic prowess, but also knowledge of chess, runes, the poetic craft, and oratory; according to Geoffrey Russom, the ideal "literary nobleman" was constructed from these qualities.⁶⁵ A catalog of *íþróttir* is usefully given in *Orkneyinga saga* in a boastful verse:

Tafl emk qrr at efla,	[I am keen to play chess
íþróttir kannk níu,	I know nine íþróttir
týnik trauðla rúnum,	I never carve runes poorly
tíð er mér bók ok smíðir.	I am skilled in reading and crafting [smith's objects].
Skríða kannk á skíðum,	I can glide on snow-shoes
skýtk ok rœ'k, svát nýtir,	I shoot and I row, which is useful
hvárt tveggja kannk hyggja	I can apply my mind both
harpslq'tt ok bragþq'ttu. ⁶⁶	to striking the harp and composing verse].

Embroidery is one activity that enjoys an equally high status among women, and that noblewomen do by default. Both Þornbjörg and the elder Hervör in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* hasten to pick up their needle when they have abandoned their masculine garb and activities; this signifies to the audience that female normativity, and thus the *status quo*, has been restored after a temporary lapse. Although the pursuit of aristocratic women, embroidery cannot be seen as the female equivalent of male *íþróttir*, but some women in the *fornaldar-* and *riddarasögur* arguably possess skills that could be regarded as *íþróttir* in the specific denotation outlined above. These include higher learning, playing chess, oratory, knowledge of runes, and medical skill.⁶⁷ Notable are the aristocratic women of *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, clearly affected by Continental romance: Princess Díana is well educated and knows *bóklígar listir* “learned arts” and plays chess, while Princess Hervör possesses all the best female virtues, in addition to astronomy, *steinaíþróttir* “stone-lore, predicting the future with stones,” and chess; astronomy was one of the seven liberal arts taught in the (exclusively male) monasteries, cathedral schools, and then universities in the Middle Ages.⁶⁸ There is a rich tradition in both medieval literature and historical sources of gems and stones being used for magical purposes, especially to heal and protect; this was usually seen as a form of natural rather than diabolical magic.⁶⁹ As Larrington notes, in Arthurian tradition Morgan le Fay and other enchantresses were closely associated with acquired magical knowledge learned from books (rather than innate supernatural qualities), and employing stones was one of these skills.⁷⁰ Women’s knowledge of stones’ powerful properties is similarly ascribed to Hervör in *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, who is portrayed as a courtly, refined, and learned lady rather than a marginalized or subversive sorceress, as is sometimes the case in the *Íslendingasögur*’s more native-inflected accounts of female practitioners of magic.⁷¹

Another intellectual skill that women possess is healing and medical knowledge. In *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, Lophæna, a bewitched princess, takes Grímr back to her cave and heals him in return for sexual favors that release her spell, while another such character, Skinnefja in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, heals Þorsteinn after a battle in which he is near-fatally wounded.⁷² Princess Ingigerðr in *Sturlaugs saga starfsama* is beautiful, wise, and a sought-after doctor: “huerri konu fridari fogr at sia en spok at uiti læknir allgodr. sottu ok margir menn til hennar þegar þeir miog þurftu” [more beautiful than any other woman, fair to behold, and wise, a good doctor. Many people sought her help when they were in need of healing].⁷³ Another woman who can heal injuries is Véfreyja in *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, the foster-mother of Sturlaugr’s wife Ása: after the protagonist and Framarr fight in a duel, she cures

the wounded Framarr overnight before reconciling the two and encouraging them to become sworn brothers.⁷⁴ Clearly, there is magic at work here, but nevertheless, this is the exception rather than the rule. In general in the *fornaldarsögur* (and *riddarasögur*), healing appears as an aristocratic female activity, mostly unspecified, but in all likelihood stemming from learned skill involving practical, technical methods such as stitching and perhaps the use of herbs and ointments rather than innate magic.

Judgment of Character

As in wisdom poetry, women's advice deals predominantly with human relationships and social conduct. Although wariness is always a useful policy, sometimes people who appear untrustworthy or strange can turn out to be valuable allies. However, this is not easy to discern, and seeing beyond the external depends on intuition and acute perception, an ability often ascribed to women. Thus, Vargeisa in *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis* advises Hjalmpér to choose as his companion a certain slave of his mother-in-law, the monstrosly large swineherd Hörðr, instead of someone more outwardly promising at court. Hörðr turns out to be a bewitched prince, and is indispensable to Hjalmpér's expedition; in fact, he saves the day a number of times. Véfreyja in *Sturlaugs saga starfsama* similarly urges Sturlaugr to form a sworn brotherhood with a certain Framarr.⁷⁵ Although his brother Kolr is a typical malevolent ogre, Framarr turns out to be a good and loyal companion for Sturlaugr; thus Véfreyja's advice to give him a chance turns out to be felicitous. Appearances can be deceptive, as *Hugsvinnsmál* states:

Engan þú fyrirlít, þótt aflvani sé
eða ljótr ok lágr skapaðr,
margr er hyggin, þótt sé herfiligr,
maðr þótt lítit megi.⁷⁶

[You should not look down on anybody, although he may be deficient in strength or ugly and short; many a one is intelligent, although he may be wretched and is capable of very little.]

Thus the moral of such advice given to heroes by women is not to judge people based on social status or external appearance but look behind these to their inner qualities.

Some men in the *fornaldarsögur* are notoriously bad judges of character and are in great need of direction from a wise female. One of these women is Jórunn, Án bogsveigir's wife, a shrewd character who frequently advises her husband on how to act. Fittingly, she is held in high esteem by her husband, who eagerly solicits her counsel and declares at one point that he is *vel kvángaðr* "well married."⁷⁷ Jórunn manages to avert danger when due to her acute insight into

character and observation of behavior, she correctly senses disloyalty in the household and tells her husband to beware of his farmhands: “Hún kveðst eigi þat ætla, at þeir muni dyggvir menn heita mega, —ok gruna ek þat, hvárt þeir hafa unnit illvirki eða ætla þeir til, því at hvert sinn er þú gengr frá rúmi þínu, þá sjá þeir eptir þér ok bregða lit við.” [She said that she did not think they could be called loyal men,—“and I suspect that they have committed evil deeds or intend to do so, since every time you leave your bed, they look after you and change demeanor.”]⁷⁸ Women like Jórunn advocate wariness in human relationships, not to trust people too hastily, a sentiment that pervades *Hugsvinnsmál* and *Hávamál* even more so. The fornaldarsögur represent women as observant and attuned to the finer nuances of behavior that possibly betray evil intent, hints that the male characters fail to notice. Thus the sagas suggest that women’s advice in human relations should be taken seriously.

In this vein, female characters sometimes advise men in detail on how to deal with untrustworthy people. Hervör in *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis* gives Hjálmþér recommendations on how to act towards her terrifying father and tells him everything he needs to know about the king and his court: “[hún] segir honum frá mörgu, hverninn þar var háttr á einu ok öðru hjá föður hennar, ok öllum vandræðum, sem þar væri at forðast.” [She tells him about many things: about her father’s particular customs and all the dangers to avoid there.]⁷⁹ This princess is another example of a daughter realigning her loyalties with her future husband (as discussed previously); furthermore, as a woman who has informal access to the king, she discloses her father’s habits and idiosyncrasies in his home, information which is useful for someone plotting against him or aiming to win his favor. The lesson from this is that women are often perceptive, and their insight should be trusted and heeded. Her advice is also that Hjálmþér should be courageous and generous in order to secure people’s goodwill, but if someone becomes too proud toward the king, he should not tolerate it:

Í þúlskaðhalla
 ok hlövi hót he ruler
 ok veðjaðust til þess
 honniglign stógráða.
 Dattu eigi övru
 árþéfa nna,
 þáttu gull þú see in the hall
 þá áttu stórgarþirs.
 . . .
 Gef þú chet, kóng,
 ef þú ert þú generous;
 þá gull þú geit guld
 ok þess þér very loyal to you.
 But ef þú ert þú fash himself up

níð mǫðr þessu,
sinnu þessu þessu,
okk þessu þessu þessu
okk þessu þessu þessu

The verses clearly have a specific setting and context, reflecting a male-oriented world at a king's court. Both echo the advice in *Hávamál* concerning social behavior; the first verse recalls the poem's beginning with the prescriptive method of entering the hall and its social implications, and the second verse has a gnomic quality, reminding the hero once again to be generous and moderate, and to punish disloyalty (cf. *Hávamál*'s "gjalda lausung við lygi" [repay treachery with lies]).⁸¹ Finally, it expresses a royal ideology, stating that no one should rise above their station; other retainers should keep their unruly peers in check in the event of any such attempts.

The general image of women in the *fornaldarsögur* is positive: they possess both intellectual properties and skills that distinguish them as learned and aristocratic. A final piece of evidence that fleshes out their attributes and role comes from *Völsunga saga*: in Brynhildr's furious reproach to Gunnarr for the wrongdoings against her, the saga helpfully provides a list of appropriate aristocratic female activities, including embroidering, providing cheer at court, playing chess, discussing matters of the heart in confidence, and also dispensing advice: "aldri sér þú mik glaða síðan í þinni holl eða drekka né tefla né hugat mæla né gulli leggja góð klæði né yðr ráð gefa." [You will never hereafter see me cheerful in your hall or drinking nor playing chess nor speaking affectionately nor embroidering fine clothes with gold nor giving you counsel.]⁸² These virtues encompass both traditional decorous female activities, as well as those that require intellect, wisdom, and emotional engagement and support. Brynhildr shockingly threatens to neglect and abandon her role because of the injuries committed against her; these duties clearly entail proper and valued virtues for aristocratic women, and the expectation to provide counsel and support suggests that women were not seen as entirely passive and subservient.

The Essence of Women's Advice

Loyalty

Having established that in the *fornaldarsögur* women are endowed with female virtues such as wisdom, prudence, sensitivity to human behavior and character, resourcefulness, and female *íþróttir*, I shall examine whether these positive qualities are reflected in the content of their counsel. A particularly rich source of episodes in which women give advice is *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*. In the beginning of the saga, trouble starts brewing between King Gautrekr and his Danish sworn brother King Hringr. Queen Ingibjörg and Hringr's queen must

talk sense into their husbands when they become suspicious of each other's intentions. These suspicions are based on hearsay and rumors at court rather than fact, as both queens point out. Hringr's wife chastises her husband for speaking *ókonungliga* "in an unkingly way," and *óvitrliga* "unwisely," expressions similarly used in Ingibjörg's words to Gautrekr.⁸³ In long speeches, the women urge their husbands to pay no attention to the *rógr* "slander" of wicked men or do the other harm, but instead persuade them to honor their friendship and bond. The wise and sensible Hringr's wife entreats him:

Ger svá vel, herra, at eigi finnist í þínu brjósti sú greymennska, at þér vilið svá niðr fella ok undir fótum troða svá marga góða hluti sem hvárr ykkar hefir við annan gert. Haldið, herra, við Gautrek konung með prýði ok drengskap uppteknum góðvilja með ást ok fullkomnum friði, ok týn eigi fyrir vándra manna orðróm svá góðs manns vináttu.⁸⁴

[Please, my lord, do not let be found such paltriness in your heart, that you will pull down and trample on the many good things that you have done for each other. My lord, stay true to King Gautrekr, uphold bravely and nobly your past goodwill, with affection and peace, and do not lose the friendship of such a good man because of the gossip of wicked people.]

Although the speech evokes nothing of the traditional female excitement speech outlined previously, these words are loaded and are clearly intended to have an effect on their recipient. Indeed, the word *greymennska* conveys the forcefulness of the queen's language, comparing the king to a lowly dog if he breaks his vows (rather than calling him unmasculine). The phrase *undir fótum troða* "to trample on" is a metaphorical condemnation of the arrogance, disloyalty, and recklessness of Hringr's mooted betrayal of his friend. Several instances of alliteration and couplets further the emphatic effect of the charged language, a technique used in both wisdom poetry and curses, and they could be regarded as transforming these words into a formal speech act. Clearly, this advice, which promotes peace and loyalty, is at least to be taken seriously; the outcome is that instead of warring, the kings remain friends, and Hringr nobly offers to foster Gautrekr's son, Hrólfr.

Hrólfr's wife, the former maiden-king Þornbjörg, is another example of a wise queen. After their wedding, she does not become passive and conformist, that is, the opposite of what she was before. Rather, although no longer masquerading as a man, she participates actively in state matters and gives her husband advice, both at her own initiative as well as at his request. Þornbjörg is strikingly independent: when Hrólfr is in trouble in Ireland on one of the several missions he undertakes, she first dispatches a steward to help him, and then summons an army, once again dons her armor, and sets off to find her husband and his companions.⁸⁵ An interesting role reversal ensues; when they arrive in Ireland, it is the queen who rescues the king, and although she transgresses her traditional female gender role by taking

military action, she is not stigmatized for it. The essence of Queen Þornbjörg's earlier advice to her husband is to be loyal to his supporters and observe social customs, and she entreats him several times to support his brother and sworn brother in their endeavors, while Hrólfr himself had planned to stay at home. Her response when he refuses to help his sworn brother Ásmundr woo the princess of Ireland is highly critical:

Þat gerir þú illa, því at eigi veit ek þann mann, attu ættir heldr sæmdar at leita en honum. Hefir hann yðr lengi vel fylgt ok þjónat kurteislega ok verit með yðr í margri hreystiferð ok þolat með yðr bæði blítt ok strítt ok reynzt jafnan inn vaskasti maðr.⁸⁶

[That is a bad thing to do, as I do not know of any man whom you should honor rather than him. He has been your loyal follower for a long time and served you courteously and been by your side in many a bold expedition and endured with you both good times and bad and always proven to be the most valiant of men.]

Thus Þornbjörg reproaches her husband for his reluctance to help someone who has served him well and courteously, and reminds him of his duty to his retainer and the reciprocal nature of their relationship. The adjective *kurteislega* “courteously” evokes chivalric values, with their connotations of decorum, valor, and duty to one's lord, and the reciprocity of the lord-retainer relationship is highlighted: the *dróttinn* “lord” must choose his friends carefully and be loyal to them, just as they are to him. The same emphasis is placed on loyalty by a third bride, the princess of Russia, who quarrels with her foster-father Þórir because of his refusal to help the king in fighting the Scandinavians who have come to woo her: “Mun þér þetta ok til mikils ódrengskapar virt, þar sem þú ert hans öndugismaðr ok þegit af honum margar gjafir ok ráðit einn með honum öllu því, sem þú vildir.” [This will be considered exceedingly dishonorable of you, as you are his right-hand man and you have received many gifts from him and you alone have been able to counsel him in every matter you pleased.]⁸⁷ All of these speeches have the intended effect in that they compel the men to act according to these female speakers' wishes. Thus we find examples of both lords and retainers needing a considerable amount of persuasion from the women in their lives before they do what duty and honor demand of them; the question remains open whether this reflects a formal speech act, just as the incitement to revenge, but it is clear that an illocutionary force for the words to function as an act, and compel the recipient to follow them, is present.

In *Hjálmbés saga ok Ölvis* Vargeisa, a monstrous *finngálmr* (a type of hybrid monster, discussed in [chapter 3](#)), later revealed to be an enchanted princess, also advocates the upholding of sworn brotherhood and mutual loyalty. In a verse in traditional eddic meter reminiscent of wisdom poetry, she gives Hjálmbér several pieces of

Mættu ei beacemad, aþan,
 aþru Ölvighr Öldir;
 bertuð ætinnhæill, enilmir,
 hana lryþerðu þu, fylgir;
 lät nigi lätstærðer
 ættu þu þingur
 ætt þu þu þu þu þu þu þu
 ætt þu þu þu þu þu þu þu
 ætt þu þu þu þu þu þu þu

Hávamál articulates the same ideas about the reciprocal nature of (homo-)social bonds. The poem stresses loyalty and generosity to one's friends:

[You know, if you've a friend whom you really trust / and from whom you want nothing but good, / you should mix your soul with his and exchange gifts, / go and see him often . . . To his friends a man should be a friend / and repay gifts with gifts; / laughter a man should give for laughter / And repay treachery with lies.]

Caution

In *Áns saga bogsveigis*, Án's wife Jórunn is the constant voice of caution, and he knows that without her warnings, he would have

fared badly.⁹² In the example of the two queens of Hringr and Gautrekr (discussed previously), female speech is coded as positive and wise, stressing the importance of deliberation, moderation, and caution, and it is depicted as the direct opposite of both the malicious gossip of the male retainers and the kings' foolish impulse to believe and act on such talk. What C. Stephen Jaeger refers to as the "miseries of courtiers," an historical reality to some extent, is reflected in this literary motif of negative male talk at court; we might compare from the Íslendingasögur Hárekr and Hrærekr's slander of Þórólfr in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*.⁹³ Competition between rulers' followers could lead to treachery and backstabbing; intrigue, plotting, and manipulating the king, the opposite of courtly virtues, were common strategies in the pursuit of power at medieval courts. Women warn against trusting the words of the king's men; when a similar situation involving male gossip in the hall arises later in the saga during Hrólfr's sojourn in England, it seems that the author is giving a counterexample in order to show how a wise king *should* act, without prompting from his wife. In this episode, King Ella's noblemen initiate a smear campaign against Hrólfr, and the English king tricks everyone into thinking that he is paying attention to their words and intends to kill Hrólfr. However, it soon emerges that both kings, instead of becoming suspicious and distrustful of one another, acted prudently and remained loyal. Here, the kings do not need to be recalled to proper behavior by their wives as they, and the audience, have already learned the lesson of caution and loyalty earlier in the saga; this episode reaffirms the point by showing the benefits of prudent behavior.

This attitude to sinister talk is reminiscent of *Hávamál's* advice about caution and wariness of untrustworthy people, "ill ráð hefir maðr opt þegit / annars brióstom ór" [one has often received bad advice from another's heart], as well as *Hugsvinnsmál's* warning against backbiters:

Sögvísuð manni skaltu sjaldan trúa,
 þeim er með rógi rennr,
 þvít málugs manns reynaz margar sögur
 lýða kind at lygi.⁹⁴

[You must seldom believe a tattling man who runs with slander, because many stories of a talkative man prove to be lies for the race of men.]

These positively coded speech acts also contrast sharply with the negative attitude to female speech in some of the Íslendingasögur, where, as Helga Kress has argued, women are often the spreaders of gossip.⁹⁵ The malicious male-coded talk in the hall highlights women's extremely positive role in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*.

A foil to Þornbjörg is Hrólfr's arrogant brother Ketill, repeatedly

shown as reckless and foolish, while the queen's wise conduct and advice is emphasized throughout the saga. Ketill proves a difficult companion, and when Þornbjörg and her brother-in-law arrive in Ireland to help Hrólfr, they disagree on how to proceed. Ketill goes against her advice to fight the small remnant left of the Irish army and instead decides to burn down the castle, including the quarters in which, unknown to him, Hrólfr was staying. Þornbjörg suspects that it might be her husband's dwelling place and tries to persuade Ketill against it, but to no avail. Ketill's orders, which Þornbjörg decides to follow, almost result in the death of his own brother, but fortunately Hrólfr and his companions escape unharmed. Ketill is said to show "enn sem optar . . . meir ákafa en forsjá eða fyrirleitni" [as usual . . . more vehemence than foresight or circumspection].⁹⁶ Þornbjörg, although unable to prevent Ketill's plans, is vindicated; this incident drives home the point that no good comes from disregarding a woman's counsel to show caution. Thus the substance of women's advice here is to think before acting, and not to let arrogance and pride overcome one's good sense.

Hospitality

In *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, Queen Ingigerðr, the wife of King Eirekr of Sweden has a premonitory dream about Hrólfr's arrival and his intentions to propose to their daughter Þornbjörg. The king asks for her advice on how to receive him. Ingigerðr advises her husband to welcome Hrólfr and explains that she doubts that their daughter will receive a marriage proposal from anyone worthier than the impressive Hrólfr:

Vel skulu þér taka Hrólfi konungi, ef hann sækir yðr heim, ok sýna honum ina mestu blíðu, því at hann er inn mesti afrekismaðr um marga hluti ok eigi víst, at yðar dóttir fái frægra mann en sem mér er hann sagðr.⁹⁷

[Receive King Hrólfr well, if he visits you, and show him the utmost kindness, for he is an outstanding man in many respects and it is by no means certain that your daughter will get a more renowned husband, judging from how he has been described to me.]

The first four stanzas of *Hávamál* also deal with the arrival of a guest and although the poem stresses caution toward a newcomer, more space is devoted to how to treat visitors, giving them what they need, such as an appropriate seat, warmth, nourishment, clothing, and a warm welcome. However, King Eirekr follows neither this general code of conduct nor his wife's specific advice since he considers Hrólfr's social status, as the king of a much smaller and less mighty kingdom (Gautland) to be well below his own. Instead, he mocks Hrólfr, offering him and his men one month's stay as an act of charity toward their impoverished army. The queen is not pleased when she hears of the scorn with which Hrólfr was treated and reproaches the

king; the next day, Eirekr is more generous to his guest and eventually he gives his blessing to Hrólfr's offer for Þornbjörg.

Hrólfr goes on to win Þornbjörg and the marriage is a happy one, as mentioned previously. An interesting point of contrast in the shorter redaction of the text is the queen's motivation in encouraging her husband to treat Hrólfr well; here, she is less concerned with Hrólfr's outstanding attributes and more with foreign policy, or to be precise, Hrólfr's connections with his foster-father, King Hringr. She tells her husband: "Er [Hrólfr] nöckuru ríkari ok meira ráðandi en yðr þickir, þar sem hann ræðr ríki Hrings konungs á Danmörk sem sínu ríki ok víðara annarsstaðar." [Hrólfr is quite a lot more powerful and rules more than you think, since he governs King Hringr's kingdom in Denmark as his own, as well as other regions.]⁹⁸ This redaction suggests that not only does hospitality pay off in the more abstract terms of gaining the friendship of a good man and as a display of one's virtuous character, but also in a more pragmatic and strategic way, in making alliances and gaining political power. Thus hospitality, an ancient Germanic social obligation that should be fulfilled on principle, has, according to the queen, an additional strategic benefit in this context. It is noteworthy that she is portrayed as involving herself in the kingdom's foreign policy and is well informed on the finer details of neighboring countries' politics, confirming the queen's advisory role in the public sphere and thus suggesting some degree of legitimate authority.⁹⁹

The Function and Benefit of Women's Counsel

In the *fornaldarsögur*, female characters who dispense advice are usually motivated by a peaceful agenda, either to resolve problems before they lead to violence, or if physical conflict has already taken place, to put an end to it.¹⁰⁰ Thus the advice has a didactic function, allowing the author to use wise female characters as a mouthpiece for socially valued actions; counsel that promotes peace and stability receives narratorial approval. This could be a result of Christian influence, but the origin of the tradition of women's pacific counsel is unclear and could be universal; Theodore M. Andersson notes in the context of the *Íslendingasögur*'s ethics that "the concept of moderation is older than Christianity."¹⁰¹ The advice frequently serves a narrative function, foreshadowing events and heightening the audience's anticipation without ruining the suspense until the end, when we see how the hero fares. Advice-giving is a gendered role; women are permitted—even expected—to give advice to men in various different situations, usually with the purpose of moderating a planned outcome and preventing and/or averting threats to individual or national safety. Women's counsel is usually followed to the hero's advantage,

thereby confirming that it is socially attuned and effective. The content of the advice is not culturally specific, revolving around social behavior, such as discounting unfounded rumors and upholding one's duties and responsibilities toward family and sworn brothers, guarding against those with bad intentions, but also not prejudging people by their lower social status and showing them hospitality regardless. In *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, women and men, with the exception of kings Hrólfr and Ella, are contrasted in this saga; the women are wise and the men less so. These two kings are indeed portrayed as virtuous, especially Hrólfr; his wisdom and caution are among his most important qualities; however, his virtue is not entirely unquestioned because of his initial refusal to help his loyal sworn brother in his mission to acquire a bride. Thus perhaps the ultimate sign of Hrólfr's wisdom is that he takes counsel from his wife instead of unswervingly believing in his own superiority.

The consequences of ignoring women's counsel are normally disastrous. In *Völsunga saga* Hamðir and Sörli disregard their mother Guðrún's advice not to hurt the stones and earth when they pollute it with their brother Erpr's blood, and they are consequently stoned to death.¹⁰² As discussed earlier, Þornbjörg's advice is sound, and it is pure luck that Ketill does not cause his brother's death through ignoring it. In *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, Ragnar loðbrók hairy-breeks does not follow his wife Áslaug's counsel on military matters, and furthermore, he does not listen to her when she wants to postpone the consummation of their marriage for three nights; as a consequence, their son Ívarr *beinlaus* boneless is born with a physical deformity.¹⁰³ Thus women's advice has the function to express privileged social values that ought to be followed.

Hávamál (st. 84) states that:

Meyiar orðom skyli manngi trúa,
né því er kveðr kona;
þvíat á hverfanda hvéli vóru þeim hiqрто skopoð,
brigð í brióst um lagið.¹⁰⁴

[The words of a girl no one should trust, / nor what a woman says; / for on a whirling wheel their hearts were made, / deceit lodged in their breasts.]

This strophe echoes the same warnings as those appearing in st. 91, cited above, where men are said to be equally untrustworthy in their efforts to seduce women. The idea of women's fickle and deceitful nature cannot have enjoyed a universal currency in medieval Iceland since the authors of sagas such as *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* deliberately use women's counsel as a literary means to champion prudence, loyalty, honor, moderation, and caution. Women's counsel aims at maintaining the status quo, promoting peace and social cohesion rather than warfare and strife or women's independent

agendas.¹⁰⁵ Since the advice is normally dispensed to husbands (rather than brothers and fathers), it signals woman's position in society as primarily that of wife; loyalty to her husband is prioritized. Despite being deployed in specific situations, female advice always has a broader relevance; lessons drawn from it benefit not only the hero of the *fornaldarsögur*, but in a larger social context, everyone in the saga audience. The social and historical circumstances in which texts such as *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* emerge, perhaps, indicate that the preoccupation with and promotion of these values reflects their authors' rejection of their opposites: excess, greed, recklessness, selfishness, and disloyalty.

Recovering Wise Women

To return to Flosi's statement "köld eru kvenna ráð": Is women's counsel in Old Norse literature generally cold? The role of women as wise counsellors of peace in the *fornaldarsögur* that I have uncovered invites reconsideration as to whether it can also be found in other genres. *Heimskringla*, the collection of kings' sagas, portrays several female inciters but also royal women using their power to prevent warfare, for example, Ástríðr Ólafsdóttir, whose peace negotiations gain her stepson the Norwegian crown.¹⁰⁶ Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir and David Clark both emphasize women's varied roles in the *samtíðarsögur*, outlining many examples of active women both inciting their male kin to violence and entreating or even ordering them to stop feuding.¹⁰⁷ In *Svínfellinga saga*, for example, two sisters-in-law, Álfheiður and Steinunn Jónsdóttir, advise their male kin to keep the peace in an inheritance dispute.¹⁰⁸ Playing an intercessory role reminiscent of the queens in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, the widow Álfheiður bids her son not to attack their uncle because of the honor and kindness he had shown him in the past, but when this has no effect on him, she tries, although unsuccessfully, to lock him in a room.¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile, Steinunn also begs her husband not to feud with her relations. Along with other people, the narrator credits Álfheiður and Steinunn with the settlement holding, but soon after Steinunn dies, it breaks: the uncle kills one of his nephews.¹¹⁰ Elsewhere in the compilation of *samtíðarsögur*, there is evidence for narratorial approval of women counseling against violence. When the magnate Hafliði Másson gets into a conflict at the *alþingi* (general assembly) and sets off to the reading of a verdict bringing his axe, his wife Rannveig challenges him to maintain his usual peaceable behavior and leave the weapons behind. This is followed by the approving comment that she was "vitr kona ok vel at sér um margt" [a wise woman and well informed].¹¹¹ Later on, having lost a finger in a brawl with his opponents, Hafliði admits to Rannveig that he should

have followed her advice.¹¹² The samtiðarsögur's accounts discussed here, depicting women working toward peace, suggest that Flosi's proverbial statement is unfairly biased against women.

The peace-promoting advice of women in the Íslendingasögur has been similarly neglected in favor of examples of female incitement, but it is by no means absent in the sources. For example, Þorfinna, the wife of Þorsteinn Kuggason in *Bjarnar saga Hítðalakappa*, gives her husband prudent advice that leads to his forming a friendship and alliance with the protagonist Björn whereas previously he had been planning on helping Björn's adversaries.¹¹³ It is striking that Þorfinna is said to have *eggjað* "whetted" the reluctant Þorsteinn into receiving hospitality from Björn, thereby subverting the usual connotations of the verb as a speech act that leads to violence, bloodshed, and revenge.¹¹⁴ The reasons she gives are partly that Björn's wife is her kinswoman and their family bond should be honored, a similar consideration to the loyalty promoted by the *fornaldarsögur*.

In another inheritance dispute, this time in *Laxdæla saga*, the wise Jörunn proves, like her namesake in *Áns saga bogsveigis*, to be more attuned to human behavior and loyalties than her husband, Hǫskuldr. She advises her husband, who is on his way to kill his illegitimate brother, Hrútr, in revenge for his appropriation of cattle and killing some of Hǫskuldr's farmhands, to settle the matter and compensate his brother instead, thus preventing the escalation of their feud. Jörunn's speech reveals that she is well aware of local politics as well as alert to Hrútr's character:

Þessi ætlun er ferlig, ef þú ætlar at drepa slíkan mann, sem bróðir þinn er; en sumir menn kalla, at eigi sé sakleysi í, þótt Hrútr hefði fyrr þetta fé heimt; hefir hann þat nú sýnt, at hann vill eigi vera hornungr lengr þess, er hann átti, eptir því sem hann átti kyn til. Nú mun hann hafa eigi fyrr þetta ráð upp tekit, at etja kappi við þik, en hann mun vita sér nokkurs trausts ván af inum meirum mönnum . . . hygg ek ok þat, Hǫskuldr . . . at þeim þykkir þú þar raunmjök sitja yfir sínum hlut ok sonr þinn, Ólafr. Nú þœtti oss hitt ráðlígira, at þú byðir Hrúti, bróður þínum, sœmiliga, því at þar er fangs ván af frekum úlf; vænti ek þess, at Hrútr taki því vel ok líkliga, því at mér er maðr sagðr vitr; mun hann þat sjá kunna, at þetta er hvárstveggja ykkar sómi.¹¹⁵

[This plan is terrible, if you intend to kill a man like your brother; but some say that Hrútr is only taking the livestock that are rightfully his, and that it would have been no crime for him to take it sooner; he has now shown that he does not intend to be considered illegitimate anymore, with no claim to his legal inheritance despite his lineage. Nor would he have initiated this suit and entered into a dispute with you unless he knew that he had trusty friends among some of the magnates . . . and I think, Hǫskuldr . . . that they consider you and your son Ólafr to take more than your fair share. Now I would consider it more advisable to invite your brother Hrútr home and show him honor, for a hungry wolf is bound to wage a hard battle; I expect that Hrútr will take this well and favorably, for I was told he is a wise man; he will surely realize that it is the most honorable option for both of you.]

The wise Jörunn is much more grounded than Hǫskuldr, who appears obstinate and overbearing for planning to attack Hrútr; she makes her

husband realize that not only is he in the wrong in keeping Hrútr's inheritance, but that public opinion is unfavorable toward him, and he cannot expect any support should he choose to enter a feud with his more impressive brother. Jórunn points out that it is only natural that coming from a powerful and prestigious family, Hrútr is unwilling to accept defeat, and that he would hardly have come to claim his inheritance had he not first secured support of the local magnates, men who furthermore are well-disposed toward Hǫskuldr.¹¹⁶ She advises Hǫskuldr to make peace with Hrútr, quoting a proverb conveying received wisdom about the nature of alpha males, urging caution in dealing with a voracious or forceful person: “fangs er von af frekum úlfi” [a hungry wolf is bound to wage a hard battle]. It should perhaps come as no surprise that the author of *Laxdæla saga* should put this advice in the mouth of a female character; much like in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, women are consistently portrayed as wise in this saga and Jórunn, introduced as “væn kona ok ofláti mikill; . . . ǫk skǫrungr mikill í vitsmunum” [a handsome woman and proud . . . and exceptionally intelligent], is no exception.¹¹⁷ Clearly, the authors of Íslendingasögur knew and employed the dominant image in the fornaldarsögur of the wise woman who gives peaceful counsel; if less striking and dramatic than that of the female inciter, she shows admirable poise and prudence.

Conclusion

This chapter has dealt with words: how women are depicted as gaining agency through speech. I have argued that women's incitement speeches function frequently as a literary device not only to convey public or narratorial opinion and an approval of male honor-driven violence, but also to achieve the opposite: women can goad men to advance their own agenda distinct from that of their male kin. This behavior consequently throws light on men's powerlessness or neglectfulness in dealing with problems that threaten the community. Women's honor is of the utmost importance to them no less than to men, and they fiercely guard it against slights and insults, a tendency which often has the consequences of initiating male violence. In those cases it can be seen as true that women's counsel is cold, and that they control the events around them. However, women can also affect situations for the better, steering problems away from aggression and calming their husbands, persuading them to make peace with their neighbors. This chapter has outlined in detail women's positive qualities; these women are often depicted as being able to see things that men do not, and are sensitive to both politics and human nature in different ways from men. They use these insights to give their husbands sensible and socially cohesive

advice, which imparts to the audience culturally privileged values such as moderation, restraint, and caution.

The prominence of the female inciter is largely dependent on sagas belonging to the *Íslendingasögur* genre as her relative absence in other prose genres suggests; furthermore, that role features only in certain *Íslendingasögur*, and in varying contexts. Female characters who have the opposite function, preventing violence, have been almost entirely overlooked in scholarship; few conjectures have been made about women's historical role based on these images although this behavior is much more rational and prudent than whetting is, considering its possible consequences. By broadening the focus from a handful of *Íslendingasögur*, privileged in previous academic discourse, to look at a different range of texts widely consumed in the medieval period, a more complicated, varied, and nuanced array of female characters has emerged. Furthermore, I have argued that a strong or an independent woman, previously regarded as synonymous with the female inciter in scholarship, might equally be one who tries to prevent her husband from going to his death, or killing a sworn brother in the name of his honor. A strong woman is also one who dares to suggest to her husband, eager for battle, that violence is not a productive solution to conflicts, and who actively uses her wisdom and words to keep society at peace and her kinsmen unharmed. Surely this female image would have appealed to many, especially a large part of a thirteenth-century audience, the part which realized that the feuding and bloodshed of their times could not continue.

CHAPTER 2

WOMEN AND MAGIC

Magic is a versatile literary motif in the *Íslendingasögur*, which authors had at their disposal to use in a wide range of settings, whether at the splendid Norwegian court, an Icelandic farm, a local assembly, or an isolated fjord in Greenland. In the *Íslendingasögur*, women's use of magic is fictionalized and fulfills a literary purpose. The magic topos appears in many contexts, both as a plot device, for example, to foreshadow and create atmosphere, and, at a more sophisticated level, as a way of promoting debate on and illuminating larger sociopolitical questions. As François-Xavier Dillmann observes, roughly the same number of women and men perform magic in Old Norse sources; however, despite a relatively equal gender distribution, male performers of magic appear in fewer texts than women, and their magic performances are less detailed.¹ Moreover, as I will discuss below, men have more options available than women to exercise agency. Women's use of magic raises questions about the relationships between gender, honor, power, and social organization, and demonstrates the conscious use of the topos as a means of engaging with the idea of women's agency. Finally, the presence of motifs borrowed from folklore and *fornaldarsögur* indicates that in some sagas, the boundaries between what critics have categorized as realistic and fantastic genres were blurred, or may never have existed in the first place for contemporary saga authors and audiences.

Magic: Aspects and Qualities

Magic, witchcraft, and sorcery, much-debated topics in Old Norse-Icelandic critical discussion, have been defined as cultural beliefs and practices, deeply rooted in the traditional ideas and “moral foundations” of society, which “provide coherent and systematic means to influence the world in which man lives.”² I will use the word “magic” as a general term for all supernatural events understood to be caused by a saga character by a variety of means for any number of reasons, and thus the employment of magic within literary narratives is consequently linked to Weber's definition of power. Attitudes toward magic in the *Íslendingasögur* are often ambiguous and depend on the perspective of particular characters; most of the terms used for those who perform magic, for example, *fjǫlkunnig(r)*, *margkunnig(r)*,

fornfróð(r), are externally neutral, referring to a character's knowledge of many or old things. As Stephen A. Mitchell has suggested, terminology relating to knowledge and examples from the sagas, for example, Gunnlaugr's magic lessons with Geirríðr in *Eyrbyggja saga*, promote the dominant idea in these sagas that magical abilities are based on skill and knowledge, something taught and learned rather than innate.³ This magical knowledge can then be transformed into power if used shrewdly.

Magic is often a crucial narrative element in the *Íslendingasögur*, employed against an individual at the turning point of a story, for better or for worse, according to where the audience's sympathies lie. Magic appears in many forms and fulfills many purposes: divination, prophecy, bewitching, shape-shifting, manipulating the elements of nature, protecting (e.g., with invisibility charms), and cursing; its practitioners belong to all social classes, whether royalty, the class of free farmers, or the lowest class of dependent servants, although they tend to be marginalized characters, ethnically, socially, geographically, and/or economically. Although characters such as *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*'s Þuríðr and Queen Gunnhildr are cast as evil witches, other women who perform magic exercise a benevolent influence and use it to prevent violence. Magic can be used to protect the family's honor or one's own, and although its deployment can be harmful to the protagonist, these actions can be justified.

A saga that perfectly exemplifies the ambivalence often found toward women's practice of magic in the *Íslendingasögur* is *Fóstbræðra saga*. In this saga (also discussed in the previous chapter), one of the two protagonists, Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld, is first defeated by Gríma from Qgr and her cunning tricks (deservedly, it seems), but later in Greenland another woman with the same name saves Þormóðr's life with her spells: this Gríma protects Þormóðr while he is on the run from his adversaries. In other words, Þormóðr is first a victim and later a beneficiary of magic employed by two characters of the same name, as if to underline its relative nature. According to Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* and many other medieval sources, Iceland converted from paganism to Christianity peacefully and relatively rapidly in ca. 1000, several centuries before the sagas were committed to vellum.⁴ However, it is the social evaluation of its outcome, not Christian doctrine, that determines how magic is viewed ethically within the social reality constructed in the saga. Magic appears throughout the corpus as a genuine and credible stratagem available in the world of the *Íslendingasögur*, a group of sagas known for their relative realism and apparent historicity (although the world they portray is of course still largely the product of authorial imagination).

Magic as a Literary Device

Given the perceived antiquity of magic by many authors in the sagas' period of composition, at least over 200 years after the conversion to Christianity, it is perhaps natural that many critics have chosen to analyze its occurrences in the *Íslendingasögur* in relation to Old Norse pagan myth and religion, taking the sagas' accounts of magic as indicative of actual heathen beliefs and practices. Scholars have attempted to reconstruct a coherent picture of the Norse pagan belief system from saga accounts, some regarding them as unproblematic and accurate representations of pagan religious practices. Jenny M. Jochens, Katherine Morris, and Helga Kress seem to make little or no distinction between women performing magic in mythical and secular texts; they regard the figure of the prophetess in the *Íslendingasögur* as based on reality, a "human counterpart" of the supernatural *völva* or sybil from eddic sources such as the poem *Völuspá*, reflecting a heathen oral tradition where women's wisdom and prophetic abilities were honored and revered.⁵ According to these critics, with the advent of Christianity and clerical culture, this aspect of female experience was either suppressed and eroded by males or appropriated by them to serve their own ends.⁶ The king's saga *Ynglinga saga*, for example, relates that *seiðr*, a special kind of magic, is specifically associated with Freyja, the Vanir goddess who first taught this kind of magic to the *Æsir*, and the highest god, Óðinn, who uses it to gain knowledge of the future.⁷ In practice, *seiðr* seems to have been more or less exclusively the territory of women; male practitioners were stigmatized as contaminated by *ergi*, passive homosexuality that was considered highly shameful.⁸ In the mythological texts, *seiðr* is the kind of magic that enables the practitioner to summon, communicate with, and manipulate the plethora of supernatural beings in the Norse pagan belief system in order to achieve his or her own ends, while its divinatory qualities could have a soothsaying function.⁹

Against this background, women in the *Íslendingasögur* who possess magical, especially prophetic, powers, are understood by some scholars as directly corresponding to mythical *völur* "sybils, prophetesses" who communicated with spirits in a formalized magic ritual; as Neil Price rightly notes, the corpus of the *Íslendingasögur* is "saturated with references to sorcery."¹⁰ While magic and supernatural events occur in the overwhelming majority of these sagas (albeit with varying frequency), it is striking that, as Gísli Pálsson has observed, the *samtíðarsögur*, a subgenre of sagas generally regarded as closer to reality, hardly contains any magic.¹¹ Furthermore, there are very few explicit (lexical) references to *seiðr* and *völur* in the corpus of the *Íslendingasögur*, compared with the large number of characters who perform magic not categorized as *seiðr* and who are not identified

as *vǫlur*. We may remain skeptical as to whether women who perform magic in the sagas are based on pagan *vǫlur*: such a view implies the rather questionable idea that authors and their audiences in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were generally familiar with historical pagan religious practices and regarded them as effective, even if they were obsolete at the time of writing.¹²

Commonly, magic relies on verbal utterances, verses, charms, formulaic phrases, or curses, but the saga audience rarely hears the content of these utterances and they are mentioned indirectly; a Christian author or scribe may have found it inappropriate or might have been prohibited to commit such material to vellum, even if it were fictionalized.¹³ Curses are understood as binding and irrevocable; in an example from *Grettis saga* in which the author does record the language of a magical utterance, Þuríðr's curse is formidable:

Nú mæli ek þat um við þik, Grettir, at þú sért heillum horfinn, allri gipt ok gæfu ok allri vörn ok vizku, æ því meir, sem þú lifir lengr. Vænti ek, at þú eigir hér fá gleðidaga heðan frá en hingat til.¹⁴

[Now I curse you, Grettir, to be deprived of all favor, all endowments and fortune, all defence and wisdom, the more so the longer you live. I trust that you will have fewer days of happiness in the future than you have had until now.]

This utterance has all the hallmarks of a speech act with its formulaic qualities, alliteration, rhythm, and couplets, not to mention its malevolent illocutionary force, and it affects Grettir deeply.¹⁵ Another famous curse appears in *Brennu-Njáls saga*: after the young Iclander Hrútr has stayed with the older, sexually voracious Queen Gunnhildr for a period, the queen grows jealous and angry that Hrútr will not reveal his wedding plans to her on his departure. The queen says to him:

Ef ek á svá mikit vald á þér sem ek ætla, þá legg ek þat á við þik, at þú megir engri munúð fram koma við konu þá, er þú ætlar þér á Íslandi, en fremja skalt þú mega vilja þinn við aðrar konur.¹⁶

[If I have as much power over you as I think I do, then I put this spell on you that you will never get any pleasure with the woman that you intend to marry in Iceland, but you will be able to have your way with other women.]

Although less alliterative and rhythmic, it is clear from the use of the verb *leggja á* “to lay a spell on” that this utterance is explicitly a curse; it is reminiscent of the Celtic *geis*, which is a command or injunction, usually laid by a woman on a man to force or prohibit him to act.¹⁷ The result is drastic for Hrútr: the curse, the audience is led to believe, causes marital problems and finally Hrútr's divorce from Unnr, which of course has wider implications for the central feud in the saga. These speech acts can clearly have an immense effect on the recipient, which contrasts with women's lack of formal power in the male-dominated

public sphere.

Ultimately, what is most important is not whether the magic has some near-forgotten historical basis or is entirely invented by imaginative narrators, but rather, it is what the authors do with it and how it functions in the narrative that is illuminating. Several Íslendingasögur contain episodes involving prophetesses, for example, Þorbjörg lítilvölva of *Eiríks saga rauða*, mostly set in Greenland, and Þórhildr Vaðlaekkja of *Ljósvetninga saga*, who prophesy about the fate of the protagonist of the respective saga and his or her descendants. A likely *locus classicus* can be identified for these scenes in *Víga-Glúms saga*, where a certain Oddbjörg is introduced into the narrative in order to prophesy about the fate of a woman's two grandsons, and then is dispensed with as soon as this has been done.¹⁸ Oddbjörg, like Þorbjörg in *Eiríks saga*, travels between farms to tell people's fortunes in exchange for their hospitality. However, in addition to her prophetic abilities, Oddbjörg is said to be a *gleðimaðr* "a cheerful person," which signifies her role as someone who provides merriment and good cheer, and since she moves around the area she is likely to bring news and gossip from the neighborhood.¹⁹ This female figure in no way resembles an awe-inspiring, mythical sybil who communicates with spirits in order to learn about the future, and there is no mention of divination or ritual of any sort. Rather, Oddbjörg is presented as an eccentric old woman who makes harmless predictions for the amusement and reassurance of the household (although in this scene, her function is to deliver a prophecy of misfortune), and therefore she disappears from the saga as soon as this has been done. The brusque exchange of words that takes place between Oddbjörg and the hostess Saldís after her prediction stems from the latter's dissatisfaction with her guest's lack of propriety; Saldís expects her to observe custom, to give a positive and reassuring prophecy for her grandsons in exchange for hospitality and attention, as was the common practice according to the saga.²⁰ It is the breach of this etiquette rather than any fear of the prophecy coming true that upsets Saldís, as her repeated use of the word *beini* "hospitality" indicates: "Eigi ætla ek þér nú allgóðan þykkja beinann fyrir skútu þessa . . . Annars þóttumk ek makligri fyrir góðan beina, ok muntu vera rekin í brott, ef þú ferr með illspár." [I suppose, given this taunt, that you do not consider your reception to be adequate . . . I should have thought I deserved better for my good hospitality and you will be driven away if you predict evil.]²¹ As may be expected, the prophecy is eventually fulfilled so the encounter serves to foreshadow future events; it also illustrates Saldís's character as a somewhat inflexible lady who stands on ceremony and customs, and demands deference to her high social status.

The prophecy motif reappears throughout the corpus of the

Íslendingasögur; knowledge of the future is predominantly, although not exclusively, a female trait. Ásdís's gloomy prediction of the tragic fates of her sons Grettir and Illugi in *Grettis saga* proves correct; she knows that they will meet their end during Grettir's outlawry on Drangey and begs them to beware of betrayal and sorcery, the two factors that bring about Grettir's ultimate demise.²² Old crones warn in vain against evil, for example, in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, where one of several supernatural omens leading up to the dramatic climax is Sæunn's prediction of the burning of Bergþórshváll.²³ Sæunn is an old woman whom Njáll's sons call senile; however, the saga states that most of what she says comes true, and their cynical outlook is characteristic of Njáll's sons rather than representative of general Íslendingasögur attitudes.²⁴ Prophecies are normally proved right, since otherwise they would hardly be worth mentioning, and thus they function primarily to foreshadow future events and create suspense, but reactions to them can serve to flesh out characters and their attitudes.

In many sagas, magic is used to explain misfortunes and tragedies that would otherwise seem inexplicable accidents or natural disasters and simply part of the hardships of life; magic serves to rationalize these occurrences. In *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, a woman is blamed for an avalanche that falls on the farm of a neighbor who had injured her son in a brawl after losing to him in a ball game.²⁵ In *Laxdæla saga*, a family of sorcerers from the Hebrides is credited with causing a ship to sink and the loss of 12 lives, and they are depicted as working their evil magic against Hrútr's family, bewitching and killing his son.²⁶ The same Hrútr, appearing in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, is cursed by Queen Gunnhildr due to her sexual jealousy, and curses also feature prominently in *Grettis saga*.²⁷ Its tragic hero is doomed from the time the *draugr* Glámr places a curse on him, but Þuríðr's malevolent magic plays a crucial part in his ultimate downfall and Grettir himself declares that Þuríðr gave him the final blow in a verse: "Nú hefir gild með goldrum / gunnelða þor unnit." [Now that tough hag, . . . has wrought a spell on the tree that sheds flaming battle-swords.]²⁸ The old woman is regarded as acting on behalf of her foster-son Þorbjörn qngull, and is therefore not legally culpable. As a consequence, Þorbjörn loses his honor and is condemned to outlawry, whereas we hear nothing more of his foster-mother.

Magic and Women's Agency

Characters who prophesy usually have little to gain or lose by their utterances; their main purpose is plot-determined. However, the magic theme takes on other forms and meanings: supernatural activity of various kinds proliferates in many of the Íslendingasögur, and some

authors use magic as a means with which to engage with ideas of agency and social position, particularly with regard to women. Magic is a weapon available to women in order to pursue their own ends; their ostensible motives are diverse but can be analyzed in terms of power and social position.

First, an incentive to use magic may be financial gain. Female characters who are socially and/or geographically marginalized and consequently financially deprived can use their magic as economic capital; it can be a valuable asset that they can exchange for goods. This is particularly clear from the character Gríma of *Eiríksfjörðr in Fóstbræðra saga*, mentioned previously, who takes into her care Þormóðr, a man on the run; she heals him and hides him by magic from their adversary, Þórdís from *Löngunes*. Gríma's motivation is primarily financial, and she receives a fair payment for her efforts. The contrast in economic status between her and Þórdís is stark: Gríma and her husband, Gamli, are poor and they live alone in a hut in a remote fjord, while Þórdís has a large household and plenty of supporters.²⁹ Gríma takes a risk by hiding Þormóðr, but it pays off and, after her success, she and her husband are generously rewarded by Þormóðr's friends in a quid pro quo exchange of favors.³⁰ This financial incentive is also found in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Víglundar saga*, where female characters are commissioned to cause someone's death in return for payment. In the latter saga, the narrator's attitude to the female magician Kjölvr is overtly hostile: she is said to be unpopular in the region as well as a great friend of the protagonist's malevolent adversary, Þorbjörg from Foss; thus the audience knows instantly that this woman and her magic do not bode well.³¹

Magic can also be used to keep the peace; although the woman who incites her male kin to vengeance remains a striking figure, not all female characters are concerned with maintaining honor at all costs, and some of them try to prevent feud or to resolve it without violence. In *Vatnsdæla saga*, featuring many fantastic episodes and folkloric motifs, another Þórdís, nicknamed *spákona* "prophetess," is approached by the *Vatnsdælir* family for advice in their quarrel with the powerful magnate Guðmundr *ríki*: "Hon var mikils verð ok margs kunnandi, ok báðu hana ásjá ok fulltings um mál Þorkels ok kváðu þar allmikit undir þykkja, að hon legði til nokkut ráð." [She was very worthy and knowledgeable in magic and they asked her for help and support for Þorkell's case and said that a great deal depended on her agreeing to advise them.]³² Þórdís accepts their request and goes on to arbitrate the matter at the following *alþingi* (national assembly), an unparalleled event in the corpus of the *Íslendingasögur*. Þórdís is a powerful woman: she has an elite social standing and enjoys the respect of the community, but she also has useful skills in magic on

which to fall back. When her offer of monetary compensation to settle the dispute is refused, and Guðmundr declares that he is determined to continue the bloodshed, she enchants him with her wand (with the help of Þorkell krafla, the defendant), so that he temporarily loses his memory, accepts the money, and the case is peacefully resolved.³³ A more ambivalent example is the wife or mistress of a certain Bergr, who appears in both *Finnboga saga ramma*, where she is named Dalla, and *Vatnsdæla saga*, where her name is Helga, in connection with another feud between the Vatnsdælir and Bergr. In both sagas, she is said to have conjured a storm after having warned her partner in vain that he is no match for Þorsteinn Ingimundarson, a member of the Vatnsdælir family, and pleaded with him not to go to their appointed duel; the storm takes care of what the woman had failed to achieve and prevents Bergr from setting out—the duel is postponed.³⁴ These women subvert and complicate male practices for maintaining honor, offering a countermodel to the archetype of the whetting woman discussed in [chapter 1](#).

Why are women represented as employing spells instead of resorting to other actions, such as physical violence, the legal system, or their powers of persuasion? This question leads to the third and most important motivating factor: honor. Widows and other independent women are more likely to use magic than those with husbands. By independent, I mean women running their own households, with a male patriarch absent (as was perhaps often the case in the feuding society of the thirteenth century). Although such independence may seem desirable to some twenty-first-century readers, these women's lack of official power and the absence of male kin to act on their behalf leaves them disenfranchized and vulnerable in a formal sense. Within the power structures of medieval Icelandic society, women were mainly defined through kinship and marital bonds with men; although they were entitled to hold their property and inherit, their male kin could legally manage their assets unless they were widows, and even then, women were not guaranteed control of their own property.³⁵ Furthermore, women could not normally participate in the medieval Icelandic legal system and needed a male guardian to represent them in legal proceedings, even if they were the head of the household.³⁶ Nor are other male strategies such as physical violence a real option: the few women in *Íslendingasögur* who enter the male sphere and take up weapons are notably unsuccessful.³⁷ The chief strategy through which women can exert influence in is by persuading the men closest to them to do their will, goading them into exacting revenge or giving them judicious advice. However, when there are no husbands or male relatives who could act on their behalf, magic is the primary tool available to

women in order to maintain their family's honor.

The *Fóstbræðra saga* example of Gríma from Qgr (not the Gríma of Eiríksfjörðr) makes the point. Gríma is a rich widow who runs her own household and becomes concerned when rumors start spreading that one of the two protagonists, the womanizer Þormóðr, is seducing her daughter Þórdís. Gríma politely asks him either to marry her or to stop his surreptitious visits for fear that her daughter's honor will be damaged. Þormóðr pays little heed to the request and declares that he does not intend to marry. He briefly refrains from meeting Þórdís but soon resumes his visits when he gets bored. The saga says that “Gríma ræddi þá enn um við Þormóð, at hann skyldi af venja kvámur sínar —‘ok firra svá,’ segir hon, ‘dóttur mína ámæli.”” [Gríma again spoke with Þormóðr and requested that he put an end to his visits, “and thereby save my daughter from reproof.”]³⁸ It is clear from the narrative that Þórdís's sexual honor is at stake. A similar situation occurs in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, where an unmarried woman's reputation is threatened; here, the woman's brother, Gísli, does not hesitate to kill the offending man to protect the family's honor.³⁹ However, Gríma has no male kin to take this sort of action and therefore resorts to magic. She sends her slave, Kolbákr, to deliver some yarn to another farm and gives him a sword before he leaves. The saga then tells us that

Gríma lét vindurnar koma í meðal stakka Kolbaki. Hon fór hönðum um hann allan ok svá klæði hans. Eptir þat fór Kolbákr leiðar sinnar. Veðr tók at þykkna ok hlána, ok tók af þat snjáfol, er komit hafði.⁴⁰

[Gríma stuffed the hanks of yarn inside Kolbákr's garment. She passed her hands all over his body and then over his clothes. After that Kolbákr went on his way. The weather began to thicken and thaw and the snow that had fallen disappeared.]

The touching and the ominous bad weather indicate that something is going to happen to Þormóðr. Indeed, Kolbákr attacks him on his way home and manages to wound Þormóðr's arm, and Þormóðr is unable to strike back: “[s]verðit beit eigi, því at Kolbákr var svá magnaðr af yfirsöngum Grímu, at hann bitu ekki vápn” [the sword had no bite because Kolbákr was made so powerful by Gríma's charms that no weapon could harm him]; although Gríma is depicted as employing spells, the yarn she had stuffed into Kolbákr's clothes provides a rational explanation for the alleged impenetrability of his garments.⁴¹ When Þormóðr, seriously wounded, returns home, his father, Bersi, warns him that it is by no means certain that this dishonor will ever be avenged, because Gríma's magic is at work.⁴² Magic is a dangerous and effective weapon available to women that even powerful men are depicted as regarding with apprehension.

Gríma's magic stratagems have not been exhausted: the next day, Bersi and his men arrive and ask about Kolbákr. Gríma denies all

knowledge of his whereabouts although she has in fact made him invisible by her spells. She manages to conceal the slave until spring, and when he is outlawed at the local assembly, she arranges his safe passage out of Iceland. Gríma also speeds the ship by conjuring advantageous weather; Kolbakr escapes and she triumphs over Þormóðr, who never fully recovers from his wound. Gríma is nothing if not resourceful, using many kinds of magic, deceit, and bribes to protect her daughter's reputation.⁴³

Several other women in the sagas are depicted as using magic to maintain honor. The Greenlandic Þórdís in the same saga is also concerned with revenge; she uses her magical abilities to locate Þormóðr, who has killed her brothers to avenge his sworn brother, Þorgeirr, with the intention of having him executed.⁴⁴ Similarly, a certain Þórdís in *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* performs *seiðr* against her brother's slayer to get him to pay her compensation.⁴⁵ Auðbjörg in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, mentioned earlier, is said to take revenge on behalf of her son by causing an avalanche to fall on his adversary's farm.⁴⁶ Ljót in *Vatnsdæla saga* expresses her wish to avenge her son Hrolleifr after the Vatnsdæliir have killed him, but must acknowledge that their family is blessed with such misfortune that she is unable to harm them despite her best efforts.⁴⁷ Finally, the malevolent Katla in *Eyrbyggja saga* curses Arnkell in revenge for killing her son Oddr, with the result that his relationship with his father deteriorates into mutual hostility. Upholding family honor is clearly just as important to women as it is to men, and magic provides a strategy for achieving this without automatic social stigma. Although the saga's attitude to these characters may be negative, this is not because of their use of magic but rather because of their opposition or hostility to the protagonist(s).⁴⁸ The sagas suggest that magic-wielding women have just cause for their actions although they subvert their gender role by acting on their own behalf instead of using more traditional, indirect methods such as goading men.

In these accounts, magic is a powerful tool; the audience understands it as a credible part of the plot, and it is usually effective. Female characters who use magic are governed by many human emotions, for example, jealousy, pride, anger, and the desire for revenge, but their main motivation, and the element unifying all of these accounts, is self-preservation. To be legally and officially disenfranchized in the public sphere is in effect to be marginalized or oppressed: women cannot employ official, formal power, the prerogative of men, and if they have no men to act for them, magic is one of the very few viable options that saga authors have at their disposal to grant their female characters agency. Not all sagas are interested in this question, but just as *Fóstbræðra saga* seems unusually

sympathetic to members of lower social strata rather than the ruling class and problematizes male heroic conventions, I would argue that it is also interested in the position of women, depicting magic as a tool used by women to control their own lives and those of others, to uphold honor, to make financial gain, or to avenge their wrongs.⁴⁹ In this saga, a female desire for power, autonomy, and subjectivity operates in a patriarchal world dominated by social structures, male violence and the legal system, to which women had no formal access. These themes surface in other sagas but are nowhere as transparent as in *Fóstbræðra saga*. Thus the author critiques the current social order, exploring women's desire to be able to affect events and people, to gain agency through the use of magic.

Finally, although supernatural motifs appear throughout the *Íslendingasögur*, some sagas are more fantastic and resemble the *fornaldarsögur*, a genre in which realism is largely abandoned. Universal folk motifs dominate and overwhelm the Icelandic setting: darkness suddenly descends, raging storms are conjured and sent against enemies, opponents are tricked by shape-shifting and optical illusions, and disappearance spells get people out of trouble. Kirtles of invulnerability that women give their sons or foster-sons before battle, a psychological signifier of maternal feelings, continue to appear; these are particularly common in the *fornaldarsögur*, as I noted in [chapter 1.50](#) Female characters who perform magic appear as the hero's helpful and protective foster-mother or his malevolent adversary, stock roles found in the *fornaldarsögur* and in oral tradition.⁵¹ Esja, the foster-mother of Búi in *Kjalnesinga saga*, is perhaps the most striking manifestation of these figures in her relentless efforts to promote the cause of her foster-son in his rise to power. Certain sagas such as *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga*, which feature these folk-type motifs—although in a strongly Icelandic context—may also be said to resemble the *fornaldarsögur*; generic overlap is strongly present in many sagas.

Conclusion

The motif of women using magic proved extremely productive for saga authors. Its appearance in the *Íslendingasögur* primarily serves a narrative function; it was used for literary purposes rather than to record past pagan religious practices. Saga authors' ideas about magic were imprecise and probably depended on oral tradition. Women uttering prophecies proved a useful device to mediate information about future events, create narrative tension and suspense, and to permit fuller development of other significant characters. Authors were free to keep these magic-wielding women relatively realistic or to invent exotic rituals for them, as in *Eiríks saga rauða*, and prophetic

women were employed to create a sinister and doom-laden atmosphere, as in *Grettis saga* and *Brennu-Njáls saga*. Magic came to be blamed for natural occurrences and storms that lead to people's deaths, or, in contrast, it could provide help and assistance by protecting, concealing, or healing others, showing that genre boundaries with fornaldarsögur have become blurred (if they ever existed in the first place). The use of magic in sagas such as *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Ljósvetninga saga* shows that saga authors did not necessarily consider themselves strictly bound by the demands for realism; furthermore, in some sagas magic acquires a sociopolitical dimension, engaging with fundamental questions related to power. Women are depicted as active in many situations; they wish to uphold their family's honor or peace in the community, to prevent their lovers from going to their deaths, and to avenge wrongdoings against them or slayings of their male kin. Many of them, socially and geographically marginalized and poor, are hoping to improve their economic situation. In short, for women desiring to achieve their own ends, who are unable to use traditional male strategies and having no (empowered) male kin to act for them, magic is the primary tool available to pursue their agenda. All sorts of motivations and methods for the employment of magic are manifested in the Íslendingasögur, but it is clear that in a significant number of sagas women are shown as developing distinctive strategies for wielding such power as is available to them, using magic as their primary weapon in a world stratified by class, age, economic position, and gender.

CHAPTER 3

MONSTROUS WOMEN

The previous chapter showed how in the *Íslendingasögur* the fantasy of being able to employ magic was used productively to engage with questions of female agency. The *fornaldarsögur* are even more inclined to employ fantastic and supernatural elements: mythical creatures such as dragons, animal-human hybrids, and giants appear throughout the corpus. Magical objects, weapons and clothes, enchantments, shape-shifting, and heroes' superhuman strength, skill, and longevity abound. Although these sagas may at times seem to be a never-ending procession of battles on sea and land between men, encounters with giantesses feature prominently in several of them. These female characters appear in many forms, ranging from threatening creatures who are swiftly and brutally exterminated to benign figures providing various sorts of help to the young male hero, including sexual favors, material (and sometimes magical) objects, and advice. Giantesses are often encountered away from the hero's home territory and civilization on their exploits in search of adventures and plunder, in the far North or East, principally imagined spaces where different rules apply from those of the human world. There has been significant critical discussion about the giant races in Old Norse myth, and how female giants commonly appear as sexual partners and even wives of the gods, but scholars have paid relatively little attention to their counterparts in the *fornaldarsögur*.¹ Katja Schulz has treated giantesses and their function in detail, aligning them with taboo sexual practices, and Lotte Motz has drawn attention to giantesses' multivalent nature.² John McKinnell argues for a psychoanalytical reading of some giantesses as maternal figures whose role is to empower the young hero, and Motz similarly argues that they serve an educational function.³ Although efforts to arrange the characters into categories have been useful, investigation into the literary and cultural reasons *why* these characters are realized as monstrous and abnormal, or what function is served by such "monstering," has been limited. Giantesses are often interpreted simply as Other, that is, everything that is not human, or as humans in "disguise," representing women of different ethnic origin or sexually transgressive women, in a polarized scheme.⁴ Scholars tend to align giantesses with the forces of nature against culture and the hegemonic social order, therefore inevitably

being conquered by the saga heroes. However, we must not assume that all giantesses are so easily and neatly categorizable, with limited and simple roles such as functioning as a plot device to launch the hero on his quest, as sex objects, or in a victim role—this view oversimplifies matters and overlooks their monstrous aspects. Building on the work of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Margrit Shildrick on monsters and monstrosity, I will investigate their different roles, characteristics, and functions, including not only hostile giantesses who are summarily killed off, but also benign giantesses who become the protagonists' lovers or helpers.⁵ I will show that these complex figures and the sagas they inhabit operate as a discursive site for a medieval discourse of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, and mortality.

Cohen notes that female giants are rare in other Western medieval literature.⁶ However, giantesses appear in almost half of the Old Norse–Icelandic *fornaldarsögur*, and can thus be seen as a distinct, pervasive feature of these sagas.⁷ In some sagas, more than one giantess appears, and in others a giantess could arguably be seen as one of the most prominent characters in the saga, for example, Brana in *Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra*, or Arinnefja in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*. The giantess is contrasted with the male protagonist and hero in many ways, and her superhuman qualities can physically threaten humans a great deal, but in some sagas, they are positive figures whose power and help benefits the hero. Further, as we will see, giantesses have such varying and complex relationships with the saga heroes, even forming mutual emotional ties and having children by them, that it seems justified to study them separately from their male counterparts, who tend to be depicted in simpler roles. The rich and multivalent representations of the giantess indicate that she had a powerful hold over Norse imagination.

Monster Theory

Some of the interpretations of giantesses mentioned here have tended to depict them in binary terms as the monstrous Other, as foils to humans, as dehumanized figures, an unnatural, inferior category that humans dominate. However, in Cohen's monster theory, the monster is a pure construct, a hybrid figure that embodies and mirrors not only the fears and anxieties but also the desires of the culture that produces it.⁸ Monstrous bodies are used to indicate any kind of alterity, for example, sexual, racial, or cultural, often more than one at a time, justifying their exclusion and the violence with which they are treated in more than one way. However, these alterities can sometimes reflect human fantasies, no less than profound fears, and thus give licence to expressing and exploring forbidden, yet alluring, preoccupations. As

the embodiment of stigmatized attributes, the monster “polices the border of the possible,” threatening anyone who steps into their realm; therefore, they can serve the dominant order as a warning against transgressing the rules and norms of the community.⁹

Consequently, as Margrit Shildrick argues, the most interesting and thus probably the most “successful” or unsettling monsters are the ones that share features with humans. An animal-like monster is easy to dismiss as completely different and irrelevant, but a monster that mirrors repressed but recognizably human aspects provokes feelings of *vulnerability*, a concept that Shildrick characterizes as “a negative attribute, a failure of self-protection, that opens up the self to the potential of harm.”¹⁰ Shildrick’s definition of vulnerability suggests that the monstrous is in fact everything in human nature that society finds undesirable and dangerous to the “normative embodiment” of the self, abjected (in the Kristevan sense) onto an outside figure and regarded with repulsion and horror.¹¹ Therein lies its ambiguity, for abjection means that the unnameable aspects still exist; they originate within the human and cannot be eliminated or made to disappear. To understand the giantess better, we must not only look at what marks her as different, but also at her similarity to humans (or vice versa, what humans have in common with the giant). We must ask why this is rejected as a negative attribute, a threat, and a sign of the vulnerability of the human.

The monster defines what is constructed as “normal” or “natural”; a monster is a being that fails to be normal and is therefore excluded from human society. However, both Cohen and Shildrick evoke the Derridean notion of *différance*: the process of defining the norm and the Other as fixed and stable categories is never complete.¹² Each is reliant on the other for its meaning, which is thus always provisional and unstable, and the porous boundaries and borders between the two ideas are always susceptible to being unsettled as a result of cultural confusion or terror. Fear of the monster is not just fear of the Other, the inhuman and abnormal, but of what is inherent in human beings, ourselves, and our corporeality, “an understandable threat to self-containment” and boundaries, according to Shildrick.¹³ The monster is, if inspected more closely, fully within: it is man’s deep-rooted fear of aspects of his own nature, and attributes potentially entailing a vulnerable state, that creates monsters. At the same time, as Cohen emphasizes, the monster, in all its corporeality and excess, opens up the possibility of exploring different and apparently deviant social or sexual practices—be they masochistic, sadistic, or otherwise taboo—within a “safe space,” and with a certain amount of enjoyment (*jouissance*), hence the combined fascination with and simultaneous rejection of what it stands for.¹⁴

Taxonomy

To dissect the features that signify abject anxieties, it is first necessary to survey the terminology and attributes that characterize the giantess and mark her as different. Apart from explicit noun labels such as *gríðr*, *tröll*, *jötunn*, *flagð*, and *risi* to signify that a character is some kind of giant, the textual evidence that permits us to describe them as monstrous relates to their external bodies as well as their inward nature; the emphasis is on their physical excess and sometimes deformity.¹⁵ The most important factor is their extraordinary size: giantesses are often said to be very large or tall in relation to humans, whom they sometimes judge to be child-sized: in *Örvar-Odds saga* the giantess Hildigunnr at first puts Örvar-Oddr in a crib with her infant brother.¹⁶ Their excessive size usually relates to height, but in some cases the giantesses are extremely round or fat, for example, Geirríðr Gandvíkrekka in *Gríms saga Loðinkinna* and Skinnnefja in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, who are broader than they are tall. Geirríðr is described thus:

Hún var eigi hæri en sjau vetra gamlar stúlkur, en svá digr, at Grímr hugði, at hann mundi eigi geta feðmt um hana. Hún var langleit ok harðleit, bjúgnefjuð ok barðöxlúð, svartleit ok svipilkinnuð, fülleit ok framsnoðin. Svört var hún bæði á hár ok á hörund. Hún var í skörpum skinnstakki. Hann tók eigi lengra en á þjóhnappa henni á bakit. Harðla ókyssilig þótti honum hún vera, því at hordingullinn hekk ofan fyrir hváptana á henni.¹⁷

[She was not taller than seven-year-old girls, but so stout that Grímr did not think that he would be able to reach around her. She was long-faced and hard-looking, with a curved nose and sharp shoulders, swarthy and with gaunt cheeks, of foul appearance and bald on the forehead. Black were her hide and hair. She wore a dried tunic made of leather. It did not reach lower than her buttocks at the back. She seemed extremely unkissable, for a clot of mucus was hanging above her mouth.]

Evidently, Geirríðr is utterly grotesque: excessively large and ugly, with sharp physical and facial features, a foul countenance, dark hair and skin, and, as a final detail, mucus hanging from her nose over her mouth, evoking a male fear of the leaky, moist female body. Grímr must of course eventually kiss her; the comment that she is *ókyssilig* “not kissable” may well be an ironic remark on her unattractiveness.¹⁸ Apart from being unusually large, some giantesses are otherwise seemingly “normal,” that is, with human features, for example, Brana and Hildigunnr in *Örvar-Odds saga*, who are described as human-like in most other ways, and beautiful in the latter’s case.¹⁹ Other giantesses are hideously ugly, distinguished by disfigured features and dark skin; with monstrous and unsightly female characters, the authors’ imagination has no limits. *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*’s Arinnefja, for example, is indeed a frightful sight: she has a broken, crooked nose, missing teeth and fingers, broken bones; her scalp, cheek, and ear have been ripped off half her head, and her

skin scorched off her body.²⁰ Although she was originally ugly, according to the narrator, the giantess queen has been even further deformed and “monsterized” by the violence to which she was subjected, into what must be imagined as a truly horrific figure to behold.

The most recurrent features of the giantesses’ appearance are, on the one hand sharp or broad facial features, and on the other, crude and immodest clothing, in particular, short tunics that reveal their genitals in the back.²¹ Skellinefja in *Dorsteins saga Víkingssonar* is described in representative terms: “[hún] var í skorpnum skinnstakki. Hann var síðr í fyrir en stuttr á bak. Hún var stórskorin mjök ok heldr grepplig í ásjónu.” [She wore a parched skin-garment. It was long in the front but short in the back. Her face was very pointed and rather ugly-looking].²² Regarding their ugliness, many giantesses are specifically described as having dark skin and broad faces, which is why scholars have linked them to the Sámi, the indigenous people inhabiting the arctic areas of Scandinavia and Russia.²³ A third recurrent feature is the comparison of giantesses’ hands with claws; many of them have extremely sharp and strong fingernails that penetrate deep into the skin in their fights with humans.²⁴ Claws on women appear in many other sagas and seem to be the cause of much anxiety, perhaps figuratively as a compulsive (male) fear of, yet desire for, penetration. Finally, giantesses are physically active: they are encountered in nature, swimming, wading in the sea, climbing cliffs, and generally being mobile, whereas the aristocratic human women of the *fornaldarsögur* are usually immobile within the castle.²⁵

Evidently, the *fornaldarsögur* are intensely preoccupied with the giantesses’ physical appearance, whereas they are rarely if ever interested in the looks of human women. As mentioned in [chapter 1](#), they are usually described with no more than the conventional *væn ok vitr* “beautiful and wise” trope with a few notable exceptions.²⁶ This also seems to be a general tendency in Old Norse–Icelandic poetry and in saga literature in general: Guðrún Nordal discusses how in skaldic verse the parts of the female body that attract are the arms, eyes, and hair, whereas the mention of legs is considered inappropriate, and in the *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*, descriptions of female physical beauty are conspicuously absent except for occasional references to the hair.²⁷ Instead, it is beautiful garments and headdresses that typically indicate sexual desirability in women, and usually, saga narrators confine themselves to noting that a particular female character is beautiful but offer no close description. There is clearly a cultural reluctance to describe women’s bodies unless they are unattractive or unusually large, suggesting the absence of an articulated indigenous idea about the aesthetics of ideal female

physical beauty. The descriptions of the giantesses mark them as different, outside human community and norms, systematically marked by grotesqueness, excess, deformity, and ugliness. The same idea of physical unattractiveness appears in the eddic poem *Rígsþula*, which describes in detail the slaves' grotesque, deformed, and as Amy C. Eichhorn-Mulligan has argued, malnourished bodies, whereas the physical description of the upper classes in the poem corresponds to skaldic verse and sagas.²⁸

The giantesses' names are normally connected to the natural environment or the body, or they are otherwise unorthodox and do not resemble human names. Many names refer to the nose, or more grotesquely, the "beak" (*Arinnefja* "Eagle-beak," *Skellinefja* "Knock-beak" or "big-nosed," *Skinnefja* "Skin-beak," *Hornnefja* "Horn-beak," and simply *Nefja* "Beak"), animal skin (*Skinnhúfa* "Skin-hood"), the moon (*Mána*), or frost (*Kolfrosta* "Dark-frost").²⁹ Runa is possibly related to *runi* "wild boar," and *Forað* refers to a pit or bog. Vargeisa is formed from *vargr* "wolf" and *at eisa* "to rush," and could thus mean "the rushing wolf," evoking the steed of the mythical giantess Hyrrokkin.³⁰ This character is an interesting and rare example of an animal-giant hybrid monster, the *finngálkn*, a truly fantastical creature with equine as well as human features: "Þat hafði hrossrófu, hófa ok fax mikit. Augun váru hvít, en munnrinn mikill ok hendr stórar." [It had a horse's tail, hooves and a great mane. The eyes were white, but the mouth large and the hands big.]³¹ Finally, Brana suggests *bruna* "to rush with great speed," but can also be linked to the first component of *brönugras*, a herb used for magical purposes.³²

Further connecting the giantesses with nature are references to them as *kvikendi*, which can mean "a living creature" but also "animals, beasts," essentially dehumanizing them.³³ Ýma's name in *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis* is reminiscent of Ýmir, the first giant in Norse mythology, who bred the first man and woman, but connections between giantesses and Old Norse myth are otherwise rare.³⁴ Not all giantesses have these kinds of names, in particular those in the *Hrafnistumannasögur* saga cycle, that is, Hrafnhildr in *Ketils saga hængs*, Geirríðr and Grímhildr in *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, and Hildigunnr in *Örvar-Odds saga*, whose names can also belong to human women.³⁵ These are also the sagas that perhaps show the giantess in the most human light, as will be discussed later in the chapter. In the physical descriptions of the giantesses and their names, the terminology relating to nature and physicality indicates that their monstrous bodies are systematically marked by inhuman attributes, which, as we will see, often signify their monstrous nature within. However, this does not apply to all giantesses, some of whom are extremely positive figures.

Race

The hostile giantess, encountered in the wild zones outside of the civilized and domesticated Scandinavian territories, threatens the male protagonist physically and sometimes verbally, often in verbal duels (flytings). This figure is usually fought and violently killed by the hero and/or his companions. Helga Kress describes the fornaldrsögur's brutal treatment of giantesses and argues that their representation is fundamentally misogynistic; in her view, untamed natural forces and subversive womanhood merge in these characters, threatening male supremacy and needing to be conquered in order to maintain the status quo.³⁶ The giantesses use their hands and bodies for fighting instead of weapons, reside in caves, and laugh defiantly (a kind of semiotic language, she argues). They attempt to destroy the men's ships, a man-made and unnatural yet culturally vital technology that enables humans to travel into the giants' territory, and underpins their economic and military dominance. This unruly behavior links the giantesses with nature in opposition to (male) culture in a binary structure. Inevitably, the men triumph in the end by either slaying or humanizing the giantesses, releasing them from a spell and transporting them back to society as human women, subduing their wild nature and reinstating them into a traditionally female subservient role.³⁷

Although highly selective in her analysis and omitting contradictory evidence (as I will demonstrate), Kress's view can be justified in the case of this subgroup, the hostile giantess. As Sandra B. Straubhaar and others have argued, xenophobic anxieties related to Sámi-Norwegian interaction and real-life struggles over hunting and fishing grounds on the border area between the two groups may have influenced the negative descriptions and cruel treatment of these giantesses on some level.³⁸ If racial tensions are at stake in these narratives, although the giantesses may originally have had connections to the Sámi (at the oral stage), for a contemporary (i.e., thirteenth- and fourteenth-century) Icelandic audience they might have additionally or rather been linked with people of Celtic and/or slave ancestry. People of non-Scandinavian origin, for example, Celts and Hebrideans, were the ethnic minority in Iceland during the settlement period and were likely of more immediate concern than the Sámi, while slaves and members of the lower class are sometimes represented in Old Norse-Icelandic sources as dark and unattractive, with abnormal bodies.³⁹ Eichhorn-Mulligan's reading of *Rígsþula* in terms of class and the body illuminates the giantesses of the fornaldrsögur: their grotesque bodies could be seen as representing

the lower and/or slave classes who may have been considered synonymous with Celts and other non-Norse ethnicities in medieval Iceland.⁴⁰ By the time the *fornaldarsögur* were being composed the influx of new slaves in Iceland had long since ceased; rather, the inferior qualities associated with slaves were seen as hereditary and could taint free men with slave ancestry.⁴¹

Violence

The hostile giantess is sometimes sexually assertive, and always aggressive and defiant. She may fight the protagonist alone, with her sisters or other giants, or she may be a part of an enemy army. Whatever form the attack takes, the hostile giantess is usually mutilated and/or killed, brutally and quickly; as Cohen maintains, the violence with which monsters are treated, physically and figuratively, “naturalizes the subjugation of one cultural body by another by writing the body excluded from personhood and agency as in every way different, monstrous.”⁴² This violence occurs in quite distinctive ways, often by penetrating the giantess’ body with a spear or arrow in the eyes, genital area, or armpit, perhaps signifying a displaced vagina.⁴³ These sites cause male anxiety, the gaze has unsettling effects, and the womb is the source of the procreative power that men lack.⁴⁴ It is a vulnerable sexual area, the target of degradation toward which the man directs his supreme power.

As an example, in *Ketils saga hængs*, Ketill has a flyting with the giantess Forað in which they threaten each other and boast of their respective physical superiority; he remarks on her ugliness, and she returns the insult, calling him small and cowardly: “sveinn lítill / . . . Sé ek þinn huga skjálfa” [little boy . . . I see your spirit tremble].⁴⁵ The encounter ends with Ketill shooting an arrow at her after she has turned herself into a whale, “en örin kom undir fjöðrina. Þá heyrði Ketill skræk mikinn. Þá sá hann gríði ok tók til orða: ‘Rennt mun nú þeim sköpunum, að Forað eigi jarlinn, og ógirnilig er nú rekkja hennar’” [but the arrow came under the fin. Then Ketill heard a loud shriek. Then he saw the giantess and remarked: “It has now been thwarted that Forað marry the *jarl*, and her bed is now rather undesirable.”]⁴⁶ This scene is clearly a metaphorical rape as Straubhaar has noted, the pointed and sharp arrow functions as a phallic symbol used to violate and dominate the giantess.

Further mutilations occur in *Örvar-Odds saga*, which tells of Ketill *hængr*’s grandson. Oddr shoots giantesses through the eyes several times in this saga with his exceptional arrows, *Gusisnautar*. The eye injuries do not necessarily kill the victims, but render them ineffective, and Oddr is then easily able to do away with them completely. The fear of a woman’s eyes or her gaze occurs elsewhere

in saga literature, usually in connection with female practitioners of magic; the anxiety linked to the giant-female gaze reflects beliefs about the evil eye.⁴⁷ In many examples, putting a bag over their head rather than blinding them solves the problem, as in the case of the evil and overbearing stepmother Grímhildr, a giantess in *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, but shooting arrows through the eyes is a more gory neutralization of their eyesight.⁴⁸ Swords, yet another phallic symbol, may also be used against giantesses, and the fornaldarsögur feature various cases of decapitations and amputations.

As we have seen, the hostile giantess is brutally punished for her monstrousness, whatever form it takes, and the narrators seem to delight in describing the treatment of these characters and how they are mutilated and killed. These accounts are reminiscent of texts from contemporary popular culture, gory horror films, or television shows on sex offenses and forensics, which seem to revel in and fetishize the gruesomeness of murder, especially those of women.⁴⁹ Perhaps these episodes appealed to the same instincts, to invoke “escapist delight” or horror, terror, and repulsion, in a clearly defined, temporary, and imaginary space from which the audience can safely return.⁵⁰ However, gory details of violence are also recurrent features in Old Norse–Icelandic literature, where the *samtíðarsögur*’s straightforward accounts of severed arms and legs and gouged eyes are considerably more realistic and less thrilling than in the glorified battle scenes of the *Íslendingasögur*.⁵¹ A preoccupation with the loss of limbs may reflect a deep-rooted practical fear of being incapacitated, and perhaps ultimately a fear of castration; in order to engage with feelings of powerlessness, the saga heroes are shown to enact on the body of the giantess what men fear can happen to them. This fear suggests continuity between giantesses and humans and using Shildrick’s interpretation of monsters, the weakness and vulnerability of the body when subjected to the powerful threat of physical violence.

Sexual Deviance

The fornaldarsögur focus strongly on giantesses’ bodies as vehicles for excess, deformity, and an unrestrained sexuality, indicated by their exposed genitalia. For the hostile giantesses, this may well reflect their internal nature, for they take the protagonists and also the audience by surprise with their aggressive sexuality, unashamed forwardness, and gleeful pleasure in prospective sexual encounters with human men, who, despite their relative small size, are no less attractive in their eyes. Although human women are occasionally allowed to experience sexual pleasure in the fornaldarsögur, their desire seems to be appropriate only if generated by the men’s initiative, and moreover they are usually of the lower (peasant) classes.⁵² Thus the sexuality of

the giantess is seen as particularly monstrous and immediately punishable; as Cohen notes, women who transgress the boundaries of normative female behavior have always risked becoming monsters.⁵³

In *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, Hornnefja shows sexual interest in Sturlaugr's friend Hrólfr nefja, whose name is remarkably similar to her own; it seems as if they are intended for each other. Earlier in the saga, Sturlaugr and his companions had helped two other giantesses travel to their father's island and for their trouble received a promise of help whenever in need; however, instead of hurrying after her sisters to claim her inheritance, Hornnefja requests to see Hrólfr. She promises to give Sturlaugr a magic spear in return for this favor, and after the companions have comically dressed Hrólfr in a costume of animal hides and horns that effectively monsterize him, they put him on display for Hornnefja on top of a nearby cliff in a curious spectacle that is likely to have been greeted with laughter by saga audiences. His artificial deformity, intensified by the moonlight, does not diminish the giantess's interest; on the contrary, she describes in heightened language what a desirable man he is: "allgaufugligr madr ertu ok ei hefir ofsaugum uerit fra sagt þessum manni er suo er itarligr . . . mer þætti su kona sæl er þenna mann ætti." [The man appears to be very handsome, and there has been no exaggeration concerning this man, and he looks so lordly . . . in my opinion, the woman who marries him is lucky indeed.]⁵⁴ Following this glowing tribute, she seems to grow a great deal, and she attempts to catch hold of his feet and pull him down from his cliff-top perch, in order (we must assume) to ravish him.⁵⁵ However, Sturlaugr moves quickly and kills Hornnefja with her own spear, thus bringing her life to an abrupt end.

Similarly lustful is the young giantess Ýma in *Hjálmpés saga ok Ölvis*, a saga full of positive and negative representations of these figures. The encounter between giantesses and humans begins with a scene reminiscent of the French serpent-fairy Mélusine, which suggests that the episode is affected by Continental romance. Ýma decorously (and perhaps ironically so) sits by a well, washing and combing her hair, when Hjálmpér arrives and starts verbally abusing and threatening to kill her, for no apparent reason. The young giantess, *in glaða mæ*r "the cheerful maiden" as she calls herself, is angered; she tells him to stop and threatens to boil him for supper, but then expresses interest in knowing him intimately: "væri hitt tilheyriliga mannligum manni at hafa aðra viðleitni við unga stúlku ok hreinliga en tala illa. Þykki mér þú efniligr maðr, en mér væri forvitni á at prófa ungan mann ok missa minn meydóm ok láta handtéra mik um mittit." [It would be more fitting for a manly man to behave differently towards a young and pure girl than to talk badly (to her). You seem to me to be a promising

man, and I would be curious to try a young man and lose my virginity and allow myself to be handled around the waist.]⁵⁶ Ýma emphasizes her cheerful disposition, purity, and youth, evidently self-identifying as a young lady, before compromising this by suggesting that they have sex. She is depicted as unable to suppress her sexual appetite despite her earnest attempt to emulate her more restrained human counterparts. Hjalmpér responds by chopping off Ýma's hand and then fighting and slaughtering all her gruesome sisters who arrive to help her. Women stepping out of a passive sexual role are clearly viewed as monstrous, and they get their just rewards by being violently mutilated and killed, suggesting that the fornaldarsögur produced and partook in a medieval regulative discourse, warning women to keep within the hegemonic female sexuality.⁵⁷

The Sexual Partner

Giantesses are often clearly defined as sexual partners, linked with sexual themes both by their immodest clothing and their extramarital sexual activity. When read closely, the fornaldarsögur reveal themselves to be intensely preoccupied by issues of female sexuality and, in particular, the appropriateness of sexual partners across boundaries of class and ethnicity. This interest is much more noticeable here than in the Íslendingasögur, which, in contrast, tend to repress discourse on these themes.⁵⁸ One of the most vivid and poignant examples of this concern is the relationship between Ketill *hængr* and Hrafnhildr Brúnadóttir, a woman whom he encounters and falls in love with on one of his fishing expeditions in the north of Norway, the realm of giants in the fornaldarsögur. She is the daughter of Brúni, a giant who is surprisingly eager to establish ties with Ketill and rather generously invites him straightaway to stay the winter and offers his daughter to him. Hrafnhildr is described thus: “Hún . . . var harðla stór vexti ok þó drengilig. Svá er sagt at hún hafði alnar breitt andlit.” [She was very large but seemed brave. It is said that her face was one ell wide.]⁵⁹ However, this does not deter Ketill; they become lovers and have a son, Grímr, but the relationship seems transgressive even for the Finns, natives of the giant territory, since Brúni hides the couple under a skin when his friends visit. When the winter is over, they both return to Ketill's home in the island of Hrafnista, much to his father Hallbjörn's dismay. Eventually Hrafnhildr is driven back to where she “belongs,” by the father's hostility, leaving young Grímr behind, while Hallbjörn, interestingly nicknamed *hálftröll* “half-troll,” insists that his son conform to social customs and find an acceptable wife. Unable to forget his lover he seems less than keen “ok var hann jafnan hljóðr, síðan þau Hrafnhildr skildu” [and he was always silent after he and Hrafnhildr were separated].⁶⁰ Three years later, she

returns to Hrafnista to visit Ketill and on finding out that he had obeyed his father and married another woman, reproaches him for his disloyalty to her: “Þar hefir þú nú gert fyrir um fundi okkra ok samvistir í lauslyndi þinni ok óstaðfestu.” [You have now ruined all prospect of our meeting and reunion with your fickleness and unsteadfastness.]⁶¹ Although there is clearly a sense that their relationship was doomed from the start due to their different social and ethnic standing, the narrative problematizes these conventions by portaying the lovers’ unhappiness over their parting.⁶²

Similarly imbued with pathos are the relationships of Hildigunnr in *Örvar-Odds saga*, and the mixed-race human-giantesses Brana and Helga in *Bárðar saga*, all of whom pine for their human lovers who will not and probably cannot marry them. When Oddr leaves Risaland and Hildigunnr, the giantess declares that because she loves him so much she could easily prevent him from leaving her, but nevertheless, she accepts that he wants to leave and would rather suffer than force him to stay.⁶³ Having been abandoned by her lover, she cries bitterly. Equally mournful is Hrafnhildr at the end of her relationship with Oddr’s grandfather, Ketill: “Hún gekk þá til skips, mjök döpr ok þrungin ok var þat auðsýnt, at henni þótti mikit fyrir skilnaðinum við Ketil.” [She then went to ship, very sad and swollen with emotion, and it was clear that she was very upset at her parting from Ketill.]⁶⁴ This experience of loss links the giantesses to some of the eddic heroic lays, in which grief over the loss of a lover is expressed and explored.

The story of the romantic relationship of a hero and a giantess sometimes takes a conventionally providential form in the motif of the bewitched princess. In several sagas, giantesses offer the hero help in exchange for promises of a sexual encounter or marriage; the hero, although reluctant, is unable to do anything but comply as he lies grievously wounded following a battle. This motif occurs in *Gríms saga loðinkinna* and *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, where both giantesses are described as monstrously ugly and seem repulsive to the hero. Despite the hideousness of their saviors, the protagonists choose life over death, and in Grímr’s case, kissing and sleeping with this creature is not quite so bad as he would have imagined: “Eigi þótti honum hún svo ill viðkomu sem hún var hrímugleg að sjá.” [He did not think her as unpleasant to touch as she was soot-black to look at.]⁶⁵ The giantess Geirríðr is transformed under Grímr’s touch, turning out to be Lophthæna, the beautiful princess to whom he was previously betrothed, and Grímr burns the hideous giantess-hide, physically and metaphorically making it impossible for her to revert to a monstrous form.

Another version of the motif is Hjálmpér’s encounter with the *finngálkn* Vargeisa in *Hjálmpés saga*. He first meets Vargeisa on an

island; she comes running out of the forest holding the most magnificent sword he had ever seen. In order to obtain it, he must kiss her *trjóna* “snout.”⁶⁶ The hero is reluctant and asks if there is not some other way for him to win the sword, but she insists that he comply, explaining that at the same time, she will throw the sword into the air and he must not hesitate to catch it. This task, clearly a test of some kind, seems both unattractive and dangerous, but Hjalmpér courageously goes ahead with it and is rewarded with the sword, which turns out to have magical attributes. Later in the story, Vargeisa’s true identity is revealed as a princess, enchanted by her wicked stepmother Lúða (previously mentioned), and Hjalmpér marries her after she is released from the spell.

Many protagonists in the *fornaldarsögur* accept giantesses as sexual partners despite their large stature and often unattractive appearance; indeed, giantesses are sexually available to men. Schulz analyzes the dichotomy of the bewitched princess as hideous giantess and the fair stepmother who turns out to be a malevolent ogre. She links these female representations to sexual taboos and anxieties; the sexual initiative of the giantesses does not accord with dominant social conventions, and thus these characters were prone to be mistrusted by the audience and categorized as monstrous.⁶⁷ However, in instances where the giantess rescues the hero from certain death, this is of course not the case, but nevertheless, the tabooed sexual acts in which the couple engages are only permissible in the wilderness.⁶⁸ Cohen similarly draws a link between monstrosity and taboo sexual practices, which render the monster even more attractive “as a temporary egress from constraint.”⁶⁹ Indeed, the hero’s free and uncommitted sexual activity with the giantesses seems to be expected in many cases; they make themselves sexually available to him, and sex between them does not seem to be forbidden per se since it occurs away from civilized society in a clearly delimited space. Rather, the taboo is against a continued interracial union between men and giants, since they cannot dream of marrying or bringing the giantesses back to their homes.

The bewitched princess is somewhat reminiscent and may be a version of the Loathly Lady, found originally in Celtic sources as early as the eleventh century, from where she travelled into Middle English texts and Continental romance, reaching Scandinavia through romance imports. One of the earliest examples of the original Celtic motif is found in “The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Muigmedoin” as well as the story of Lugaid Laigde.⁷⁰ The Loathly Lady appears in a context similar to the *hieros gamos* motif: a symbolic union between the man destined to be king and Lady Sovereignty, a female figure personifying the land, Ireland.⁷¹ In Celtic sources, the

character reminiscent of the Old Norse giantess is an ugly hag who demands a kiss in return for a drink from her spring.⁷² After a succession of four brothers who all fail, only the fifth has the courage to complete the task. As his reward, the hag is transformed into a beautiful young woman, declaring that she is Lady Sovereignty, that is, an allegory for power or kingship, ugly to behold and difficult or painful to achieve, but once gained, fair and sweet to the possessor.

Several key elements correspond between the Old Norse and the Celtic narrative patterns of the Loathly Lady narrative: the giantess is encountered in the wilderness, she is ugly and sexually aggressive in that she demands a kiss (or marriage) from the hero, he courageously complies, and as a consequence she is transformed into a fair maiden. Furthermore, in the Irish tradition, the scene takes place by a well or water; in one case in the Old Norse texts, this happens by the sea, in another on an island (albeit in the forest).⁷³

Irish influence on Old Norse literature has long been noted, and Rory McTurk goes as far as arguing that *Laxdæla saga* contains an Icelandic manifestation of Lady Sovereignty.⁷⁴ Although both narratives feature transformation as their main elements, there are important underlying factors missing in the *fornaldarsögur* “version” of the Loathly Lady, such as the series of unsuccessful male candidates who all flee horrified in contrast to the worthy hero. Perhaps more important is the apparent lack of an allegorical or figurative point to the Old Norse narrative; the exchange of a kiss or promise to marry comes in return for saving the hero’s life or bestowing on him a magic object, so it is a *quid pro quo* exchange of favors. Both characters have something to gain, if seen from a hegemonic point of view: the giantess to be released from her spell, resocialized, and live happily ever after married to the hero; the hero to escape death or acquire the priceless object that will be indispensable in his further exploits. The female character in this case does not seem to represent Sovereignty in an abstract sense, as in the Celtic story, and there is no explicit link to gaining a kingdom. In these sources the female character does not have a separate motive to help the hero; the drive behind the story is the allegory. The Celtic hero conquers the land because of his bravery in facing the hag, and he is therefore the legitimate possessor of kingship. Similarly, although somewhat less metaphorically, the Old Norse hero gains a noble wife who will presumably inherit land or assets.⁷⁵ In the Celtic sources the hag is not a victim of enchantment, but in the sagas, she has been transformed by an overbearing stepmother who is perhaps the abjected “bad” mother in a Kleinian sense, or a mother who wishes to protect her honor until a worthy man comes along.⁷⁶ Yet another interpretation of the motif of the bewitched princess as giantess in the *fornaldarsögur* could be to

consider her a fantasy similar to Cinderella stories: a woman of low status turns out to be a fair and noble princess. Thus due to the lack of certain important elements, if the Old Norse bewitched princess is based on the Loathly Lady story, it is certainly a highly modified version, changed from a political allegory to a narrative that justifies the hero's marriage to a woman of low origin with the wish fulfilment of her real noble blood.

"The monster . . . polices the borders of the possible," and Cohen relates this monster to Michel Foucault's idea of the panopticon, when people internalize taboos and self-regulate; power is produced and mediated through discourse, which renders physical force unnecessary.⁷⁷ Sexual and emotional issues are clearly at stake in these accounts of human men's erotic relationships with giantesses, which cannot persist unchanged. Either the giantess is abandoned for a more appropriate partner, or she is humanized and subjugated, transformed into a princess, as in *Gríms saga*'s depiction of Lophthæna; the bewitched giantesses could signify a desire to enhance the prestige of one's ancestry.⁷⁸ At the same time, however, the subtext of these monsters highlights society's reluctance to consider alternative evaluations of race, sexuality, gender, and everything non-normative.⁷⁹ Keeping in mind that medieval Iceland was a community obsessed with prestigious lineage and, as previously mentioned, slave ancestry was stigmatized long after slavery had been abandoned, Shildrick's concept of vulnerability invites us to draw a link between these accounts and real-life anxieties about origin and ancestry. These giantesses reflect an engagement with the question of ideal or appropriate partners and the rejection of marriage between social and/or racial groups (at least if the woman is socially inferior). This convention is problematized by displaying the sorrow of the parted lovers, but ultimately its necessity is reaffirmed, suggesting that entry into medieval Iceland's elite class, which married almost exclusively within their own social group, was limited.⁸⁰

The Helpful Giantess

The helpful giantess is a positive figure, treated with sympathy by narrators; she helps the hero in various ways, and though she sometimes becomes her protégé's sexual partner, this is not her primary function.⁸¹ Cohen's emphasis on the monster's resistance to "easy categorization" rings particularly true here.⁸² Most of these giantesses are referred to as *fóstrur* "foster-mothers," and indeed their role is arguably maternal, but their fostering is very different from the role that appears in sagas set in Iceland.

In the *Íslendingasögur*, fostering is a highly regulated social custom that takes several forms.⁸³ It can roughly be divided into two

categories, first when a child is fostered in its own home by a servant, and second when it is sent away to another place, for example, to study for a high-status vocation such as *lögmaðr* “law-man” or priest, or for political purposes, to forge alliances and to ensure reconciliation between two parties after a feud.⁸⁴ Both men and women can be foster-parents, and often the fosterer has a lower social status than the child. The image of the relationship between foster-parent and child in the texts is usually that of strong mutual affection.⁸⁵

In the *fornaldarsögur*, fostering sometimes resembles the customs found in the *Íslendingasögur*’s Norwegian/Icelandic society, for example, in *Örvar-Odds saga*. Giantesses are sometimes called *fóstrur* “foster-mothers” although this often seems a questionable term, given the implications that fostering has in other sources. These foster-mothers do not resemble the first model in the sense that they obviously do not live in the child’s household and therefore do not help raise the hero from childhood. Consequently, this version of fostering serves a different purpose and follows other paradigms from those of human society; the sources are unclear as to what exactly it entails in terms of the care or education provided by the giantess. The young protagonist often stays with the *fóstra* for various lengths of time, typically one winter, at the end of his stay receiving gifts and advice from her that will help him on his quests. Motz has argued that giants were connected with wisdom and intellectual inspiration; thus the hero’s stay with them in the wilderness is a period of education.⁸⁶ However, in *Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra*, the hero does not seem very much wiser when he leaves the giantess despite the advice she has given him, and in some cases, the heroes do not stay with the giantesses for any length of time.⁸⁷ It is difficult to see what constitutes the fostering, apart from the test of courage and strength in facing the giantess in order to prepare the hero for trials in his adult life. The “fostering” of a hero by a *fóstra* in the *fornaldarsögur* can be seen as a term for a nonsexual, helping male-female, or a repressed mother-son, relationship.⁸⁸

The giantess Gríðr in *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, who is a somewhat elusive character, exemplifies this role. Although she is called Illugi’s *fóstra* in the saga’s title, the textual evidence for a fostering relationship between them is otherwise scant: the young man does not stay with her for any length of time (only one evening) and does not receive advice or help from her.⁸⁹ The protagonist comes to her abode in a cave after a shipwreck in search of fire and passes her three tests of courage, releasing her from a spell that her monstrous stepmother Grímhildr had put on her.⁹⁰ As a reward, Illugi receives Gríðr’s daughter Hildr’s hand in marriage, as well as a few treasures. After she has reverted back to her human form as the widowed princess

Signý, he acts as her legal guardian when King Sigurðr, Illugi's sworn brother, proposes marriage to her. Despite the title, Signý/Gríðr has more in common with the bewitched princess discussed above than the foster-mother although the role of sexual partner is transferred to her daughter.

In *Örvar-Odds saga*, the foster-mother role is conflated with the sexual companion. Here, Hildigunnr and Oddr's relationship quickly moves from a fostering to a sexual one:

Hún leggr hann þá í vöggu hjá risabarninu ok kvað yfir þeim barngælur ok gerði vel við hann. En er henni þótti hann óþakr í vögunni, lagði hún hann í sæng hjá sér ok vafðist utan at honum, ok kom þá svá, at Oddr lék allt þat, er lysti; gerðist þá harðla vel með þeim.⁹¹

[She then placed him in a crib with the giant-baby and sang lullabies for them and was good to him. But when she thought he was becoming restless in the crib, she laid him in her bed and put her arms around him, and eventually, Oddr did everything he wanted; they got along very well.]

The pair gets along well during the winter when Oddr stays with the giants; the fruit of their union, a son named Vignir, remains with his mother but joins Oddr at the age of ten and dies in battle not long after. There may be a (quasi-)incestuous Freudian angle to this maternal-turned-sexual relationship between the hero and the giantess, suggesting another form of unspeakable vulnerability, repressed sexual desires toward the mother.

The role of Brana, the *fóstra*-figure in *Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra*, is even more conflicted. Although she is clearly at times a monstrous giantess, she is only half-giant and has many human qualities; unlike her half-sisters, she is *með mennsku móti* “with human attributes.”⁹² This is probably because her mother was human and was abducted by her father, the giant Járnhauð, a rare feature in the *fornaldarsögur*, in which mixed-race individuals normally have a human father and giant mother, raising questions about rape and anxieties about size.⁹³ This giantess appears as a tragic figure, doomed to live outside human society despite all her humane qualities but desperate to conquer the giant-nature from which she comes, metaphorically shown when she willingly kills her father after the protagonist Hálfðan has failed to do it for her: “Ek mun sjálf verða at drepa föður minn, því at ek sé, at þér getið eigi banat honum, ok mun þat illa fyrir mælast, ef ek verð honum at bana, en þó skal þat nú vera.” [I will have to kill my father myself, for I see that you are unable to do so, and it will not be viewed favorably, if I slay him, but this shall be all the same.]⁹⁴ She knows that kin-slaying is not honorable, but she must do it all the same since Hálfðan fails (although she has already made Járnhauð drunk in order to ease his task). Brana comes to Hálfðan's rescue more than once, but gains little in return, and she must constantly get her inept

former lover out of trouble when he has ignored her advice. Hálfðan is so stupid that he even forgets to marry the princess to whom Brana had guided him and helped him woo, and she must visit Hálfðan to wake him out of his stupor. Brana's patience is admirable, and she seems to give him unconditional love; it is somewhat puzzling that she continues to help Hálfðan. He is one of the most undeserving "heroes" of Old Norse literature, and the question of comic intent might rise as he makes one mistake after another.

Most puzzlingly, even though Brana seems to love Hálfðan and has a child with him, she is very persistent in making sure that he marries his designated wife, Princess Marsibil. As previously mentioned, her name appears as a component in the herb *brönugras*, a plant whose potency was believed to cause people to fall in love.⁹⁵ This effect sounds remarkably similar to that of the magic herbs Brana gives Hálfðan before his departure in order to gain the love of the princess. Perhaps Brana stands as a personification of the catalyst of Love, but it is striking that she is given such a humane character and deep feelings, and such an unworthy hero on whom to bestow her help.

In all the above cases, it seems that the giantesses want to be a part of human society and align themselves with the hero, rather than their giant relatives, especially the father, a feature typical of the "Girl as Helper in the Hero's Flight" folktale type (AT313c).⁹⁶ They fight and kill their own monstrous kin and pine for their human lovers, but they are both unwilling and unable to remain with them. Thus these giantesses struggle with their own monstrous nature and often try to destroy it, but this is futile. Only in the case of Gríðr is the helpful giantess allowed into human society, but much like the bewitched princesses, she must first revert back to her real human identity.

Conclusion

The giantesses of the *fornaldarsögur* are indeed a diverse group of characters and clearly had an imaginative power over medieval Icelandic audiences unrivalled in other medieval literature and even beyond. Most of the human women of the *fornaldarsögur* conform to their traditional social roles, while the giantesses are their unruly opposites: immodest, sexually aggressive, physically active, defiant, and grotesque. Giant women are psychologically intriguing in terms of the hidden desires and anxieties they signify. As Cohen has argued, as well as causing fear and disgust, the monster both attracts and fascinates; unusually, in Old Norse-Icelandic culture, the monster is commonly gendered female.

The very variety of roles given to, and attitudes toward, the giantess indicates that she was a popular figure that offered saga authors a productive vehicle with which to engage with difficult (gendered)

topics and explore certain preoccupations that are more complex than simply a binary opposite Other. These notions are both universal and also a part of a discourse specific to the social and historical context; the sagas use giantesses to probe anxieties about important and overlapping matters such as social origin, ancestry, and prestige, class, marriage and appropriate partners, social order, ethnicity, gender, sexual behavior, and sexuality. The giantesses represent difference and alterity, that which is deemed inappropriate and inferior, for example, women of the lower classes and racially Other, perhaps of Celtic or slave origin. Members of the dominant upper class cannot marry them, but nevertheless have both sexual and emotional relationships with them, and these relationships hold their attraction despite the taboo they incur. Ketill seems to consider the giantess Hrafnhildr an appropriate and desirable partner even though his father does not; their union is thwarted by her giant ancestry. Hrafnhildr's tragedy lies in her similarity to humans, although she is not "same" enough. Judging from the textual evidence presented here, authors and audience wanted to see themselves as possessing prestigious ancestry, racially pure, and sexually conformist. As the relationships with the giantesses indicate, this ideal probably does not reflect historical reality, an uncomfortable fact that needs to be repressed, displaced, or abjected, again suggesting the difficulty of being human and maintaining the enclosed, normative self. The giantesses also articulate sexual taboos, and their aggressive sexuality is a warning against all kinds of deviance: women's sexual agency, male sexual passivity and penetration, rape, incest, male promiscuity, and sex with other social or ethnic groups. At the same time they provide an outlet to explore these deviant behaviors and revel in their pleasure in an imaginary space.⁹⁷ Giantesses' bodies are sites of violence; the ultimate human fear of physical mutilation and a painful and horrible death is here abjected onto the giantess because it is too uncomfortable to be articulated in any other way. This mechanism perhaps reflects the fact that violence was embedded in the social and political fabric of medieval Iceland, unlike political cultures of modern state authority. All these states of powerlessness and deviance are what Shildrick refers to as vulnerability, and vulnerable bodies, subject to weakness, transgression, and tabooed carnal desires, show the process of abjection transformed into giantesses' female monstrous bodies.

CHAPTER 4

ROYAL AND ARISTOCRATIC WOMEN

Óláfs saga helga, the middle part of the compilation of kings' sagas known as *Heimskringla*, contains an episode commonly referred to as *Friðgerðarsaga*, relating a dispute between the kings Óláfr Haraldsson of Norway and Óláfr *sænski* "the Swede" Eiríksson of Sweden; this episode has been described by Lars Lönnroth as a narrative that "centers upon some of the most fundamental problems of medieval government and kingship."¹ The episode is indeed fundamental to the text's subtle portrayal of power politics and involves several key characters: the Icelander Hjalti Skeggjason, the two kings, equally ambitious but unlike in character, the Swedish *jarl* "earl" Rognvaldr, and three aristocratic women: Ingibjörg Tryggvadóttir, Princess Ingigerðr, and her illegitimate half-sister Ástriðr, daughters of Óláfr *sænski*. Before the culmination of the episode, the dramatic confrontation between Þorgnýr *lögmaðr* "law-man" and King Óláfr *sænski* at the Uppsala assembly, there is a long prelude with a relatively large involvement of women that has been surprisingly neglected by scholars.² This part of the story is characterized by delicate and covert efforts to settle the dispute through diplomatic means; these efforts are mainly on the part of Hjalti Skeggjason and Ingigerðr Óláfsdóttir, but with significant contributions from Rognvaldr *jarl* and, especially, his wife, Ingibjörg, who holds a personal grudge against Óláfr *sænski*. The aftermath of the dispute is dramatic as well: in some narrative traditions (i.e., the *Separate Saga of St. Óláfr* as well as the *Legendary Saga*), Ástriðr Óláfsdóttir travels to Norway, meets King Óláfr and boldly offers herself to him in marriage.³

The role of women in biographies of Norwegian kings as regards marriage, reproduction, and succession has been well documented by Jenny Jochens, who shows how the development in royal succession changed drastically throughout medieval times.⁴ In the early medieval period, succession can be described as chaotic and potentially destructive: any male who had royal blood, whether the son of the king's wife or concubine, or the son of a female member of the royal family (e.g., the king's sister), had a legitimate claim to the throne. Accession was often a question of who was the most ruthless in the struggle for power, and this led to frequent warfare between the

contenders for the throne, who could be as many as several dozen. Women with royal connections, for example, kings' wives, concubines, and sisters, could participate vicariously in these struggles by promoting their own sons with any resources available to them. King Hákon Hákonarson changed this practice in the mid-thirteenth century, designating only the children borne by his wife as his legitimate heirs, thereby establishing a new order based on primogeniture and legitimacy, radically reducing the number of potential heirs.⁵ At this time translated *lais* and romances come to prominence at the Norwegian court, including texts that engage with sexual mores and (mis)behavior at court and conveying rising anxieties about women's sexual deviance. As Larrington has noted, the queen's body, accessible only to the king, functions both in literature and reality to legitimate heirs.⁶

As *Friðgerðarsaga* and other episodes suggests, royal women in the kings' sagas appear in more roles than just as wives and producers of heirs. Judith Jesch has demonstrated that Queen Ástriðr Óláfsdóttir is in *Heimskringla* portrayed as an active politician in her own right.⁷ She receives praise in verse, and thus official approval, from the Icelandic poet Sighvatr for her successful maneuvering at a Swedish parliament, persuading the Swedes to help her stepson Magnús Ólafsson (the son of King Óláfr Tryggvason) claim the Norwegian throne. This scene is all the more interesting because in this saga, Ástriðr operates in the public and traditionally exclusively male sphere without stigma, and she is publicly lauded in a skaldic poem (normally exclusive to men), which, Jesch suggests, was composed in praise of Ástriðr for an historical occasion.⁸ Ástriðr is not the only woman to have direct and effective impact on the course of events in these sagas; this chapter examines several other royal women who figure largely in Scandinavian court politics. Ástriðr's sister, Ingigerðr Óláfsdóttir, is another example of a powerful royal woman; these two sisters along with Ingibjörg Tryggvadóttir feature extensively in the *Friðgerðarsaga* episode, discussed in detail next.⁹

In this chapter, I will analyze the roles of royal and aristocratic women and the scope of their power in state matters, using as my main source *Heimskringla*, the longest extant collection of kings' sagas, but mentioning other historiographical works where pertinent. These female characters have special status due to their elevated rank, enabling them to operate outside the traditional female spheres of reproduction, child-rearing, and domestic responsibilities. I will examine the relationship between gender and power in these texts, the considerable impact these aristocratic women have on the power dealings normally reserved for men and their role in politics. This chapter will examine which tools are available for royal women to

wield power, whether they are motivated by an agenda separate from that of their male kin, and how successful they are in executing any such agendas. Sverre Bagge has argued that politics in *Heimskringla* is less governed by ideological discourse, for example, ideals regarding the scope of the king's power and the role of the people in government, and more by rationally assessing one's interests and striving to protect and advance them.¹⁰ This approach and method of furthering one's agenda could be described as *Realpolitik* and informs much of my analysis.¹¹

Overview of Royal Women and Their Roles

Unlike most of their *fornaldarsögur* counterparts, the royal women of the *konungasögur* are rarely described by stock phrases such as *væn ok vitr*, and there do not seem to be any staple aristocratic female characteristics or unified behavior that runs consistently through the sagas. Many queens and princesses appear in the *konungasögur* of whom the reader learns nothing more than their name, whom they marry, and who their children are, and in many cases their only role is to be exchanged between families in political negotiations and settlements, and to produce an heir. In some instances they function as a vessel for the royal line insofar as the throne can be inherited through the female line (*kvenknē*). Some women appear as victims of a king's sexual appetite or as willing mistresses; having an illegitimate child with the king could benefit the mother and her family in the long term since this child would have a claim to the throne. However, as Jochens shows, after King Hákon Hákonarson's change in the law regarding royal inheritance in 1236, being a king's mistress became less attractive: her children could no longer put themselves forward as legitimate heirs and thus the possible advantage from an extramarital relationship with the king was lost.¹² It is difficult to generalize about the royal women in the *konungasögur*, but there are some identifiable patterns of their roles, outlined here.

Queens of Legend

The *konungasögur*'s representations of royal women are not the only images of queens to which a medieval audience had access. The royal women of *Ynglinga saga* and the sagas set early in the (pseudo-)history of Norwegian kings bear a greater resemblance to the *fornaldarsögur* than the ones set in more recent times.¹³ As I argued in [chapter 1](#), the role of royal and aristocratic women in the *fornaldarsögur* is mainly to give socially cohesive advice, but occasionally they transgress against what is seen as traditional female behavior, for example, gathering an army and fighting in battle. A few of them, for example, the legendary

queens Olof and Skuld of *Hrólfs saga kraka* or Grímhildr of *Völsunga saga*, are depicted as cruel, vicious, and scheming.

Similarly cruel, some of the queens of *Heimskringla*'s first, legendary section plot the murder of their male kin: Ása Ingjaldsdóttir in *Ynglinga saga* is said to cause the death of her husband and his brother, and Skjálf hangs her drunken husband, King Agni, with the help of her men, by threading a rope through his necklace while he is asleep.¹⁴ In *Hálfðanar saga svarta*, after murdering her husband, Queen Ása takes her infant son Hálfðan to her father's kingdom in Agðir and raises him there while assuming rule herself: "Ása, móðir hans, fór þegar með hann vestr á Agðir ok settisk þar til ríkis þess, er átt hafði Haraldr, faðir hennar." [Ása, his mother, took him directly west to Agðir and assumed rule of the realm which had belonged to her father Haraldr.]¹⁵ These episodes could just as easily appear in heroic legend as in historiography, such is their fantastical character; the boundaries between historiography and legend in the medieval period were often blurred.¹⁶

Another forceful royal woman is the proud princess Gyða Eiríksdóttir, who surprises the emissaries of King Haraldr *hárfagri* "fair-hair" by refusing to become his mistress and boldly demanding that he marry her, and, moreover, only after he has conquered and unified all of Norway.¹⁷ There is a great sense of astonishment on the part of the king's emissaries (and the narrator) over Gyða's behavior: for these demands she is considered *heldr stórlát* "rather proud" and thought to answer the king's request *furðu stórliga* "exceedingly proudly."¹⁸ However, King Haraldr is intrigued by her suggestion and wonders why he did not think of this idea himself. Instead of punishing Gyða as his men suggest, Haraldr immediately sets about the task. When it is accomplished and he has become the ruler of all of Norway, Gyða becomes one of his many mistresses or consorts and bears him five children. She does not achieve her goal of marriage and royal status, but this episode describes the ambitions of an assertive petty king's daughter.

When mentioned specifically, the queens of the earliest part of *Heimskringla* can be described as powerful, independent, forceful, and often violent characters. They use means of gaining power unavailable to those queens in sagas set later in history. Even more striking than these legendary queens is the Norwegian Gunnhildr, sometimes called *konungamóðir*, the wife of King Eiríkr blóðǫx. She cuts a formidable figure as one of the most notorious female characters in Old Norse literature, appearing in numerous sources as a powerful queen who rules Norway with her sons, an alluring woman with a substantial sexual appetite, mainly for younger men, and a strong personality. When she appears in the *Íslendingasögur*, she can be categorized

along with the famous Hallgerðr, Bergþóra, and Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir as one of the female characters who causes the most trouble for male heroes. In these sagas, Gunnhildr is portrayed as beautiful and sexually attractive, generous to her protégés, but dangerous if crossed. She jealously casts the infamous spell on Hrútr that leads to the breakdown of his marriage and, eventually, feuding between the powerful families of *Brennu-Njáls saga*.¹⁹ In *Laxdæla saga*, Gunnhildr's portrayal as an amorous dowager is one of the most sympathetic: she is infatuated with Hrútr, showering the Iclander with favors and gold, but doing him no harm, and nor does she injure another favorite of hers, Hrútr's nephew Óláfr páfi "peacock."²⁰ In other sagas the queen's portrayal is more negative, for example, in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, in which she is depicted as Egill Skalla-Grímsson's arch-enemy, an evil sorceress intent on destroying him by any means possible.²¹ In *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, she pursues Geir Grímsson, using magic to try to kill him.²² Gunnhildr is linked with agency, sex, and witchcraft; her portrait is complex in each saga, and she seems able to get away with extraordinary behavior for a woman due to her position as queen. William Sayers convincingly argues that in the *Íslendingasögur*, Gunnhildr could be read as a literary construct, a metaphor for the threat Norwegian political supremacy offered to Iceland in the thirteenth century, gendered female in the demonized character of the queen.²³ Thus Norway is seen in the guise of a femme fatale whose sexual power is alluring but dangerous to Icelandic chieftains attracted by the favors of the Norwegian court.

Gunnhildr also has an exceptional status in the *konungasögur*, and, again, the image that emerges from the different accounts is striking. The historiographical sources in which the queen appears are generally considered untrustworthy and negatively biased; Gwyn Jones remarks: "There is no evidence that Eirik, Gunnhild, and their royal brood were greedier, crueller, more devious or ambitious than their fellow contenders for rank and riches in Norway."²⁴ Northern (Sámi) origins instead of her original Danish ones, the practice of sorcery, a flagrant sexuality, and an utterly wicked and ruthless character are attributed to Gunnhildr in many of these texts.²⁵ Some of these are blatantly biased, for example, *Jómsvíkinga saga*, which, overtly hostile to Gunnhildr, represents her as a promiscuous, aging shrew, lured to Denmark with promises of a noble marriage, only to be executed by drowning in a bog, an account also appearing in *Ágrip*.²⁶ The Danish king Haraldr suggests that this ignominious death is fitting for such a queen when he praises her executioners: "Þá hafi þér vel gert . . . hefir hún nú þann sóma er eg hugða henni." [You have done well . . . she has now gained the honor I intended for her.]²⁷ Although other queens, such as Álfífa, are depicted negatively,

no other royal woman is said to have been executed in the sources.

In *Heimskringla*, the narrator does not have the same fiercely negative attitude to Gunnhildr and portrays her more neutrally, listing both her positive and negative qualities, although every positive aspect of her character is followed by a negative one: “Gunnhildr, kona hans [Eiríks], var kvinna fegrst, vitr ok margkunnig, glaðmælt og undirhyggjumaðr mikill ok in grimmasta” [Gunnhildr, Eiríkr’s wife, was the most beautiful of women, wise and versed in magic, cheerful in speech and scheming and very grim], conveying her wisdom, beauty, and cheerful disposition but also her cruel and scheming character.²⁸ Notably, there is no mention of deviant sexual activity whereas the narrator of *Jómsvíkinga saga* emphasizes her promiscuity. Gunnhildr’s unusually active involvement in politics makes her unique within *Heimskringla*; the hostile accounts elsewhere of her sexual deviance and practice of witchcraft must be regarded as a fictionalization by authors working within the historical genre, whatever their reason. In that sense, she can be seen as a transitional figure, with qualities belonging to both the legendary queens and those coming after her who will occupy a more realistic political role.

Mothers of Kings

In order to define royal women’s role in government as it was understood in the medieval period in Iceland (and perhaps also Norway) more clearly, it is helpful to look to another medieval Germanic society, the Anglo-Saxon one, and how queens are represented in this culture’s historiography. The wives of kings in Wessex seem to have had limited power; in the ninth century, they were not even granted the title “queen” according to Asser, King Alfred’s biographer.²⁹ However, as Pauline Stafford has shown, mothers of kings in the tenth and eleventh centuries had many more opportunities for wielding power than kings’ wives; if they had economic resources, family and political connections, “intimate access to the king,” and enough ambition and determination, they could achieve a dominant position at court.³⁰ Anglo-Saxon royal marriage practices were less than strict; as in Norway, kings often had children by many wives and concubines, following the ancient Germanic rather than the Christian-Catholic tradition. Because of this arrangement and a reluctance to designate royal wives as queens by consecration, women who had children by the king did their utmost to promote their offspring in an effort to secure their own position. If they succeeded in placing their son on the throne, they could act as ruler, either solely or jointly with the son—depending on his age and other factors—enabling them to gather supporters, resources, and power. The examples of King Cnut, who married Ælfifu (Álfífa in

Scandinavian sources), the widow of Æthelred, the previous monarch, and another king, Æthelbald, who married his stepmother Judith, indicate that these marriages were contracted in the hope of retaining the loyalty of the queen, her sons, and her faction; the queen needed to be neutralized as a threat to the new king, suggesting her considerable scope of power.³¹

Mothers of kings also have a special position in the *konungasögur*; Norway, just as Anglo-Saxon England, was slow in adopting Christian, monogamous marriage practices and the idea of primogeniture, and these marriage practices can help explain some of the representations of queens and other royal women in Old Norse historiography.³² As Jochens points out, women who had children by the king could reap many benefits, in the case of bearing a recognized heir they could secure a position at court, strengthened if the son actually became king; they could promote any other offspring they might already have had and further the interest of their own family.³³ In this context it is worth asking whether the term *konungamóðir*, frequently applied to Gunnhildr, had a specific meaning, implying a socially sanctioned role of authority. A direct translation is simply “mother of kings” and the plural could indicate that Gunnhildr was considered highly successful in supporting or placing her sons on the throne, since her five sons ruled together with Haraldr (the eldest) as head king.³⁴ However, the title could conceivably suggest a formal role for the king’s mother. In the beginning of *Haraldar saga gráfeldar*, the term appears directly after the statement that Gunnhildr took a great part in government: “Gunnhildr, móðir þeira, hafði mjök landráð með þeim. Hon var þá kǫlluð konungamóðir” [Gunnhildr, their mother, was heavily involved in ruling with them. She was at that time called *konungamóðir*], and it is reiterated a few chapters later, in which it is related that Gunnhildr ruled jointly with her sons although she does not bear the title *dróttning* “queen”: “Gunnhildr konungamóðir ok synir hennar váru opt á tali ok málstefnum ok réðu landráðum.” [Gunnhildr *konungamóðir* and her sons held frequent discussions and councils and governed the kingdom.]³⁵ Therefore the title conceivably had a formal connotation indicating a powerful political role, whether formal and legitimate or not, instead of simply being emblematic of the obvious maternal position of Gunnhildr. Álfífa, the mother of King Sveinn Knútsson, seems to have the same role as Gunnhildr, ruling with a son; however, she is not referred to by this or any similar title, although she is the unofficial ruler due to her son’s young age and immaturity: “Hann [Sveinn] var bernskr bæði at aldri ok at ráðum. Álfífa, móðir hans, hafði þá mest landráð.” [Sveinn was a child both in age and maturity. Álfífa, his mother, governed for the most part.]³⁶ It is also noteworthy that in *Heimskringla*, Álfífa is never referred to by a title, unlike for

example, Emma, the Danish king Knútr's wife, or Ástriðr and Ingigerðr, daughters of King Óláfr Eiríksson of Sweden, who are all referred to as *dróttning*.

Mothers who deliver their royal sons from harm are greatly admired and praised: Ástriðr, the mother of Óláfr Tryggvason, and Inga, Hákon Hákonarson's mother, make equally dangerous journeys with their infant sons to protect them against their rivals for the throne, otherwise they would probably have been killed.³⁷ Their actions probably reflect a maternal instinct as well as self-preservation and the long-term advantage of raising an heir. Gunnhildr's fierce ambition on behalf of herself and her sons leads her to have Ástriðr hotly pursued all the way to Sweden, where the former tries to entreat, and then to bully the Swedish king to hand the boy over.³⁸ This event, set in the tenth century, is evoked in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* (composed in the 1260s) by Sturla Þórðarson, in the context of Inga's escape with Hákon to Trondheim, aided by the Birkibeinar, a Norwegian political faction that supported Hákon and his father, the descendants of King Sverrir:

Sva hafa vitrir menn sagt, at þat hafi líkazt verit vas þat ok erfide, er Birkibeinar hófdu j þessarri ferd, með otta þeim, er þeir hófdu af sinum óvinum, adr en þeir kómu með kongssyni norðr j Þrandheim, þui vosi er Ólafur Tryggvason ok Astridr, modir hans, fengu j sinum ferdum, þa er þau flydu ór Norege austr til Suíþiodar fyrir ríki Gunhildar kongamodr ok sona hennar.³⁹

[Wise men have said that most similar to the toil and trouble that the Birkibeinar had in this journey—including the fear of their enemies which filled them before they came with the king's son north to Trondheim—was the exhaustion that Óláfr Tryggvason and his mother Ástriðr faced on their journey when they fled from Norway eastward to Sweden, away from the rule of Gunnhildr *konungamóðir* and her sons.]

Clearly this mission was difficult and arduous, undertaken in dangerous circumstances and inducing fear in the Birkibeinar; nothing but Gunnhildr's infamous pursuit of Ástriðr and Óláfr can compare to it. The difference between Ástriðr and Inga, however, is that the former was the king's wife, while the latter was his secret mistress of whom few knew except those closest to King Hákon Sverrisson. When her son Hákon becomes king, she must undergo an ordeal to prove his royal blood, which she does successfully; here, the body of the mother speaks when no other proof is to be had, and this is taken as a valid testament to the king's true paternity.⁴⁰

The representation of the king's mother as being able to wield power is dependent on factors such as (some degree of) economic independence and political support, and in the case of Gunnhildr, a determined, assertive, and charismatic personality. In the other examples, the agency of the mother has a direct relationship to the position of the son and is secondary in this context; her access to power helps him rise to the throne, and allows continuing, if indirect,

access to power through intimate access to their sons.

Heads of Royal Households

It is expected that mothers of boys or young men with a claim to the throne will support their sons' candidacy: Óláfr Haraldsson's mother, Ásta Guðbrandsdóttir, provides her son with military training and a ship, and honors him with a lavish banquet when he returns to Norway after his foreign exploits.⁴¹ Although she had by then married her second husband, Sigurðr, and had sons with him, this suggests that Ásta may have had independent access to economic resources that she used to support her eldest son's bid for power.

Queens and princesses are sometimes portrayed as residing in their own court or separate household of some sort, with their own retinue in some cases. For example, Queen Ástriðr Óláfsdóttir rides to meet her husband Óláfr Haraldsson with her own entourage and seems to keep her own royal household after his death, where she hosts the skald Sighvatr for an extended period.⁴² Ástriðr's sister, the Swedish princess Ingigerðr Óláfsdóttir has her own *bú* "estate" in Ullaracr where she holds a great feast in honor of Rognvaldr *jarl*, and Geira, queen of Vindland and one of King Búrisláfr's three daughters, reigns over her own land with the aid of a certain Dixin (it is not clear if and to what extent she shares power with her father).⁴³ These powerful women are portrayed as having considerable economic independence and resources, an important basis for their power independent from male kin.

Whetters

The pattern and function of whetting was discussed in [chapter 1](#); much like in the Íslendingasögur, royal and aristocratic women in the konungasögur occasionally use incitement speeches to achieve their own ends. Prominent examples of whetting queens in *Heimskringla* are Sigríðr *stórráða* "the ambitious," and Þyri, who are both depicted as having their own political or personal motives for pressuring their husbands to act according to their will.⁴⁴ They are keen to gain the upper hand in disputes with men: Þyri retrieves her dowry from her ex-husband Búrisláfr in Vindland, and Sigríðr avenges the insults that she considers Óláfr Tryggvason to have given her, that is, his breaking off their engagement and slapping her cheek. These two queens are, because of their whetting, at least partly blamed for the battle of Svölð, in which King Óláfr Tryggvason is killed and his army defeated by a Danish-Swedish alliance (led by Sveinn tjúguskegg and Óláfr *sænski* Eiríksson).

Óláfr Tryggvason's sister Ingibjörg later entreats her husband Rognvaldr *jarl* to support Óláfr Haraldsson; her motive is that his

adversary, Óláfr *sænski*, had been implicated in her brother's death, and she is eager for retribution: "Skjótt mun ek birta minn hug, at ek vil, jarl, at þér leggið á allan hug at stoða orðsending Óláfs konungs, svá at þetta ørendi komisk fram við Sviakonung, hvernigan veg sem hann vill svara." [I will immediately make my opinion known, my earl, that I want you to put all your heart into supporting King Óláfr's request, so that this affair may come before the king of Sweden, whichever way he will then answer it.]⁴⁵ Although this monologue features none of the recurrent features of an incitement speech, involving accusations of lack of manliness in the traditional sense, the husband's reply—"Ekki er þat blint, hvers þú eggjar" [It is plain to see to what you are inciting]—implies that there is just such a subtext in her words, and they may have been uttered in public.⁴⁶ The narrator's comment that "[Ingibjörg] gekk at með öllu kappi at veita Óláfi konungi" [Ingibjörg forcefully advocated support of King Óláfr] is expressed in the same urgent words as the servant-woman's challenge to Hrafnkell in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*: "Lætr griðkonan ganga af kappi" [the servant woman presses on forcefully].⁴⁷ Thus if the narrator's reasons for these royal women's incitement speeches are credited, they are concerned with upholding their own or their family's honor, pursuing personal vendettas, and improving their economic status; they successfully urge their husbands to act on their behalf.

Weber's Model of Power

For royal women involved in politics, success in wielding power is determined by questions of parallel or conflicting interests, the woman's personality (e.g., shrewdness, powers of persuasion), resources available to her, and in some cases the legitimacy of her authority. In order to address these issues in a systematic way, I use the threefold theoretical model of power defined by Max Weber, previously alluded to in the introduction. In addition to conceiving of power (*Macht*) as a party's successful effort to achieve its will in a social relationship, whether met with opposition or not, Weber delineates the narrower concept of domination (*Herrschaft*), the likelihood that this party will be able to realize its will onto individuals or social groups. He then goes on to nuance the forms of power, explaining *legitimate authority* as the type of domination that a social system communally accepts as valid and to which it submits willingly. In Weber's model, three categories of legitimate authority are defined: the first is *traditional domination*, which rests on custom; an example of this is monarchical rule.⁴⁸ Second, there is *legal domination*: power by virtue of an office or formalized laws, and the social consensus that these laws are legally, rationally established and

impersonal. The third type is *charismatic domination*: achieving an agenda by displaying extraordinary leadership qualities, heroism, or other forms of charisma that will generate trust in and support of the individual in question. People submit to the ruler's commands because this individual's authority is accepted as legitimate due to his or her personal qualities; people put their trust and faith in him or her. Examples of this form of rule can be politicians, warlords, religious leaders, or even dictators. A charismatic ruler can also hold a legitimate office, but his or her power equally or more so derives from his or her personality or image, that is, popularity with the group that accepts this individual's domination. These three forms of authority can and will overlap; no society will have one of these systems existing in a pure form.

Weber's model ranges from a highly formalized and developed form of government based on law and order, procedure, regulations, and impersonal officials (bureaucracy), through to power limited to some degree by precedent and traditions, down to an unstable, irregular, and idiosyncratic way of deciding how things are done, potentially based on the whims of the charismatic leader. Authority is also rooted in hierarchy, that is, rulers' belief that they have the right to give orders, and their subordinates' belief that they are obliged to obey these commands. Above all, authority is a specific and clearly defined type of power: having the socially sanctioned right to execute one's agenda. Power structures function not only as a means of dominating others, but in turn can be considered to produce the distinct subjectivity of the ruler.⁴⁹

Weber's three types of power are difficult to match up with corresponding representation of queens in the *konungasögur* since there is no point in the texts at which acceptable or appropriate queenly behavior, or the scope of a queen's formal, traditional domination (if any) is made explicit. As Stafford has noted, medieval queens in European sources are depicted as mainly gaining power through counsel and influence, a method likely to be universal (at least in Western culture).⁵⁰ As wives, mothers, or daughters, royal women were in the unique position of having intimate access, through familial bonds, to the king, a public figure with magisterial authority, and they were able to use informal methods of persuasion to influence the king and the court. Thus they had the potential to wield informal power to some degree, even though they were not in a role of authority. However, this category of power, due to its arbitrariness and informality, is difficult to analyze further and it can be described as domination, the *ability*, rather than the *right*, to rule. It seems more fruitful to explore whether there existed any concept and sphere of *legitimate authority* for royal women, and in what cases queens are

depicted as exercising domination without legitimacy. Arriving at this picture involves carefully teasing out the nuances of power that are attached to these women in the sources, and trying to distinguish the boundaries between the types of power.

Women as Politicians

Individual royal and aristocratic women who have agency in the narratives and who work overtly or covertly, often through male agents, in order to influence the course of events, will be discussed in the following section. The narratorial attitude to them varies, but ultimately the social evaluation of their actions depends on who benefits from them.

Emma

A queen's independent maneuverings are regarded by historiographers as justifiable in some cases. As in many *fornaldarsögur*, kings in the *konungasögur* are sometimes depicted as bad-tempered, stubborn, or unreasonable, needing the wisdom and sound advice of their wives in order to make productive decisions. However, if the king is absent and the kingdom is faced with warfare or trouble, how is the queen to act? This is a rare situation, and although the author of for example, *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* would without doubt answer that she should take over the king's role, *Heimskringla* does not provide clear solutions to this matter, indicating that there was no fixed idea of a queen's official role in such a case.

This gray area is where Queen Emma of Denmark operates. Her husband Knútr (Canute in Anglo-Saxon sources) is in England, but an attack on Denmark is imminent from the Swedish and Norwegian armies. Emma is faced with a difficult situation: Knútr had put his man, Úlfr *jarl*, in charge of Denmark's defences, but the Danes are anxious about being without a king as military leader. After a speech made to the council of noblemen by Úlfr, they decide to place the adolescent son of Emma and Knútr, Hq̄rða-Knútr, on the throne. Úlfr officially claims that this is the express wish of King Knútr, but the narrator reveals that Emma was behind this: "í þessi ráðagørð hafði verit upphafsmaðr Emma dróttning. Hafði hon látit gera bréf þessi ok látit innsigla. Hafði hon með brq̄gðum nát innsigli konungs, en hann sjálfr var leyndr þessu qllu" [it was Queen Emma who had hatched this plan. She had had those letters made and sealed. She had obtained the king's seal with trickery but this was entirely concealed from him].⁵¹ Emma appropriates the royal seal *með brq̄gðum* "with trickery" to forge a letter to the Danes, presumably because she would be unable to convince them to go along with the plan without

evidence to convince them that the king backs the mission. After gaining the support of the aristocracy, Hǫrða-Knútr, the adolescent new king, and Úlfr *jarl* go to Jutland to gather an army, but Knútr intercepts this move when he returns with an adequate military force to ward off the invasion. He immediately demands that his son abdicate the title and submit to him.⁵² The queen sends word to Hǫrða-Knútr immediately to obey, for he has no means to resist his father; the prince does as he told and, kneeling before King Knútr, he symbolically returns the misappropriated seal.

A crucial element in this narrative is that Úlfr, the king's right-hand man, is not depicted as having mandate to defend the country on his own; thus Emma, who cannot know that Knútr is on his way from England, works with Úlfr in order to ensure the safety of the kingdom. By taking these stealthy measures, Emma has the tempting opportunity, as the mother of a young king, to become the *de facto* ruler; however, rather than portraying the queen as a power-hungry woman staging a coup d'état in order to seize power from her husband, *Heimskringla* relates the events with some degree of sympathy for Emma, arguably representing her course of action as necessary to resist the impending attack. Given the alternative, a Swedish-Norwegian invasion, the queen is, despite her methods, partly if not wholly justified in taking matters in her own hands in the absence of her husband, who has clearly not provided Úlfr *jarl* with the political and military resources necessary to carry out his responsibilities. The position of effective legitimate domination is left void and, in order to fill it, Emma needs an official sign to demonstrate that she has authority and to put the plan into effect.

Queen Emma works within the concept of legitimate domination, but under false pretences; since she needs to appropriate the king's symbol of his traditional domination, it emerges that as queen, she does not have a distinctly defined role legitimately to act as head of state and ruler in the king's absence. By stealing the seal, Emma manages to execute the plan she has developed with Úlfr to gain support from the noblemen, albeit with her teenage son as a figurehead, until Knútr returns from England and puts a stop to their actions. In this example, a royal woman must work through male agents and deception, since she does not have a defined authority in state matters; thus she exercises nonlegitimate domination in Weber's terminology.⁵³

Álfífa

As *Heimskringla* relates, the Danish king Sveinn, son of the same King Knútr and his second queen, Álfífa, came to power along with his mother in Norway after the death of King Óláfr Haraldsson, who was

later canonized. The mother and son are unpopular, imposing new taxes and restrictive laws that make the Norwegians extremely unhappy; these were, however, imposed at the initiative of Knútr. Despite their dissatisfaction, the Norwegians dare not rise up against the new laws for many of their sons have previously been sent to Knútr as hostages in his campaign against King Óláfr. However, the Norwegian factions are divided, and some decide to make Álfífa the scapegoat for everything with which they are discontented: “Brátt hófðu menn ámæli mikit til Sveins konungs, ok kenndu menn mest þó Álfífu allt þat, er í móti skapi þótti.” [Soon men blamed King Sveinn a great deal, but even so, they held Álfífa most responsible for everything which crossed them.]⁵⁴ In *Heimskringla*, Álfífa’s culpability is thus subtly suggested, but the hostile sentiment toward her is even stronger in *Fagrskinna*, which categorizes her with Gunnhildr, and depicts her as inherently evil and wrongdoing:

Álfífa móðir hans [Sveins], er kǫlluð var en ríka Álfífa, hón réð mest með konunginum, ok mæltu þat allir, at hón spillti í hvern stað ok fór fyrir þá sök stjórnin illa við landsfólkit, ok svá margt illt stóð af hennar ráðum í Nórēgi, at menn jǫfnuðu þessu ríki við Gunnhildar ǫld, er verst hafði verit áðr í Nórēgi.⁵⁵

[Sveinn’s mother Álfífa, who was called Álfífa the powerful, ruled the most with the king, and everyone said that she spoiled everything and for that reason the people of the country were not in favor of her rule, and so many unfortunate events occurred as a result of her government in Norway that people equated this rule with the age of Gunnhildr, when things were at their worst before then in Norway.]

Much like Gunnhildr, some historiographers or scribes demonize Álfífa; in one manuscript version, she, too, is ascribed with practicing malevolent magic.⁵⁶

Álfífa seems to occupy a role carrying more official authority than Emma; for example, she is an active participant in the canonization process for Óláfr Haraldsson, working against it with all her might. When Óláfr’s body is inspected for signs of saintliness, *Heimskringla* relates that those present are Álfífa, Sveinn, the bishop, and a few magnates; the queen opposes the bishop and comes up with every possible excuse to rationalize the fact that Óláfr’s body has not decomposed.⁵⁷ Acknowledging Óláfr’s sainthood would give his illegitimate son, Magnús, whom some of the Norwegians supported, a much stronger position in his claim to the throne. In a narrative from *Fagrskinna*, Álfífa and Sveinn later make an appearance at a *þing* “assembly” in Niðarós, where they attempt to impose even more unjust laws, much to the chagrin of the locals. The Norwegian magnate and supporter of Magnús, Einarr, nicknamed *þambarskelfir*, is vocal in his opposition to the laws, insulting the regents by calling them a mare and a foal, thereby evoking shameful *níð*-connotations (in *níð*, a legally defined act with the purpose of shaming or slandering someone, men were often said to have been born of a

mare).⁵⁸ Álfífa responds by ordering the farmers to stop complaining and listen to the king: “Setisk niðr böendr ok hlýði konungs ørendi, en kurri eigi svá lengr” [Sit down, farmers, and listen to the king’s message, and do not grumble any longer], but Einarr succeeds in turning the assembly against them.⁵⁹ Everyone leaves after his second speech and the laws are not passed, although Álfífa did not consider the matter to have been discussed conclusively.⁶⁰ Later, after the arrival of Magnús Ólafsson in Norway, Sveinn realizes that he has no support and leaves the country; this is the end of Álfífa’s reign in Norway.⁶¹

Ástríðr Óláfsdóttir

Another example of a royal woman appearing at an assembly is King Óláfr Haraldsson’s wife, the Swedish Ástríðr Óláfsdóttir, mentioned previously. Working to secure her stepson Magnús’s (and thus perhaps her own) interests, she addresses the Swedish assembly in order to influence foreign politics at the highest level. This takes place several years after the death of her husband; as already mentioned, her stepson, the illegitimate Magnús Ólafsson, the son of a certain Alfildir, is brought forward as a candidate for the Norwegian throne, seeking to challenge Sveinn Knútsson. It is not made explicit whether Ástríðr speaks at the assembly with official authority but neither is her appeal reported as unusual or subversive: “En á því þingi talaði Ástríðr ok . . . talaði hon langt ok snjallt . . . Kom Ástríðr svá orðum sínum ok liðveizlu, at fjqlði liðs varð til með Ástríði at fylgja honum [Magnúsi Ólafssyni] til Nóregs” [Ástríðr spoke at that assembly and . . . she spoke at length and eloquently . . . With her speech and her support of Magnús, Ástríðr succeeded in gathering a great host to accompany him to Norway].⁶² A combination of two factors are at work here. First, Ástríðr has charisma, extraordinary verbal powers—*málsnilld* “eloquence” being listed as one of the queen’s qualities in several places in *Heimskringla*—and also intelligence, for the queen is *djúprøð* “deep of counsel” according to Sighvatr’s praise poem.⁶³ These impressive leadership qualities might be seen to endow her with charismatic domination.

Second, since the text frequently refers to Ástríðr with the epithet *dróttning* “queen,” she has official status and respect as the wife of a king, even if he is deceased. In a later verse, Sighvatr reproaches Magnús’s mother Alfildir, a lowborn concubine of Óláfr’s, for quarrelling with the queen, telling her to be mindful of her place: “Ástríði láttu æðri, / Alfildir, an þik sjalfa, / þér þótt þinn hagr stórum, / þat vildi guð, batni.” [Alfildir, let Ástríðr take precedence over yourself / even though your status has greatly improved / God willed that.]⁶⁴ Thus in Sighvatr’s view (and thus probably the

narrator's) Ástriðr's royal rank endows her with official status and power, traditional domination in Weber's terminology, power that Alfildr, the king's mother, does not have.

Both Ástriðr and Álfifa speak at important state assemblies, and although one queen fares dramatically better than the other, it is clear that as far as participating legitimately in politics is concerned, they are not impeded by their sex. Álfifa is unsuccessful in wielding power not because she is a woman or a queen, but because the Norwegians are extremely hostile to her and Sveinn's rule and revolt against them. In fact, Einarr *þambarskelfir*, Knútr's former ally, led the Þrændir faction (originating from a certain area of Norway called Þrændalög) in the rebellion against King Óláfr Haraldsson and considered himself the most likely candidate to become Norway's ruler after his death. Instead, Knútr installs Álfifa and Sveinn as regents, which causes Einarr to withdraw his support from Knútr, siding with Magnús. The queen and her son are regarded by the Norwegian people (or at least parts of it) as foreign invaders who put unpopular new laws and taxation into effect; this does not meet with approval. They have the added misfortune of happening to reign at a time of bad weather and crop failure, which did nothing to raise their subjects' spirits.⁶⁵ At the assembly, the Norwegians can be said to withdraw their support of the authority hierarchy, that is, the formal relationship between monarch and subjects that necessitates legitimate domination in Weber's terminology; their shift of allegiance from Knútr to Magnús thus leaves Álfifa and Sveinn without any kind of domination, whether legitimate or not.

Ingibjörg Tryggvadóttir

One case that seems to be difficult to adapt to any single paradigm in Weber's model can be found in the *Friðgerðarsaga* episode in *Heimskringla*, and involves the extended settlement talks between Óláfr *digri* "the fat" Haraldsson (the later saint) and Óláfr *sænski*, mentioned previously. In this episode, the kings are usually referred to as Óláfr *digri* and Óláfr *sænski*, whereas the former becomes Óláfr *helgi* "the saint" at his canonization; in the following discussion I will retain these nicknames for clarity. The episode occupies many chapters and shows how complex international negotiations between royal courts could be. The kings' quarrel is initiated by a dispute about which of the two had the right to claim taxes in Vestra-Gautland, a certain region on the border of the two kingdoms that was previously held by Sweden, but which Óláfr *digri* had appropriated as his own. The disagreement quickly escalates into full-blown antipathy toward Óláfr *digri* on Óláfr *sænski*'s part, and this affects the Swedes in Vestra-Gautland, first, on an economic level—it makes trade with Norway

difficult—and second, as a matter of international power politics. Ingibjörg Tryggvadóttir, the wife of Rognvaldr Úlfsson, *jarl* of Vestra-Gautland, is adamant that her husband should help Óláfr *digri*. Although it is a risk to oppose his own (Swedish) king, it would weaken Rognvaldr's position even more if he refused Óláfr *digri*'s request for support, as he would then be considered cowardly. Furthermore, Ingibjörg has a personal motive in seeking to bring about the downfall of Óláfr *sænski*, and she uses her influence to persuade her husband to form an alliance with Óláfr *digri*:

[Ingibjörg] gekk at með öllu kappi at veita Óláfi konungi. Hon var aftakamaðr mikill um þetta mál. Helt þar til hvárt tveggja, at frændsemi var mikil með þeim Óláfi konungi ok henni, ok þat annat, at henni mátti eigi fynask við Svíakonung þat, er hann hafði verið at falli Óláfs Tryggvasonar, bróður hennar, ok þóttisk fyrir þá sök eiga tiltölu at ráða fyrir Nórøgi. Varð jarl af fortöllum hennar mjög snúinn til vináttu Óláfs konungs.⁶⁶

[Ingibjörg forcefully advocated support for King Óláfr. She was very determined in this matter, both because there was kinship between her and King Óláfr, and secondly because she could not forget that the King of Sweden had been present at her brother Óláfr Tryggvason's death, and for that reason considered himself to have claim on the rule of Norway. The *jarl* was persuaded by her to side with King Óláfr.]

Despite being married to a Swedish magnate, Ingibjörg has many reasons for supporting Óláfr *digri* instead of her husband's king: the narrator emphasizes a desire to uphold her honor (by seeking revenge for her brother and preventing her husband from being accused of cowardice), family connections, and, finally, an emotional investment in seeing her brother's enemy fare badly. These reasons, emotional rather than strategic, seem to be the cause of her determination to persuade her husband to follow her will.

When the envoys of Óláfr *digri*, Björn stallari and Hjalti Skeggjason, arrive at Rognvaldr's court and address the dispute, Ingibjörg urges her husband to support Óláfr *digri*, regardless of the risks involved:

Skjótt mun ek birta minn hug, at ek vil, jarl, at þér leggið á allan hug at stoða orðsending Óláfs konungs, svá at þetta örendi komisk fram við Svíakonung, hvernngan veg sem hann vill svara. Þótt þar liggi við reiði Svíakonungs eða öll eign vár eða ríki, þá vil ek miklu heldr til þess hætta en hitt spyrisk, at þú leggisk undir höfuð orðsending Óláfs konungs fyrir hræzlu sakir fyrir Svíakonungi. Hefir þú til þess burði ok frændastyrk ok alla atferð at vera svá frjáls hér í Svíavelði að mæla mál þitt, þat er vel samir ok öllum mun þykkja áheyriligt, hvárt sem á heyra margir eða fáir, ríkir eða óríkir, ok þótt konungr sjálfir heyri á.⁶⁷

[I will make my opinion known at once, earl, that I want you to put all your effort into supporting King Óláfr [*digri*]'s request, so that this affair may come before the King of Sweden, whichever way he will answer. Even at the cost of the King of Sweden's wrath, or all our property or realm, I would much rather risk that than have the news circulating that you have shirked the request of King Óláfr because you are afraid of the Swedish king. You have the strength and the support of your kinsmen and all the means here in the Swedish kingdom, to be free to state those views of yours which are honorable and everyone will think worth hearing, whether few or many will listen, powerful or weak, and even if the king will hear you.]

Ingibjörg points out the resources that Rognvaldr has at his disposal: the support of their kin and his official role as *jarl*, providing him with an arena in which to speak legitimately and persuade the Swedes to support him, as well as the political weight of a magnate.⁶⁸ Rognvaldr accedes to Ingibjörg's request but insists on being in control; he wants to deliberate and evolve a plan instead of acting rashly. From the beginning, although he makes it look as if his wife is compelling him to it, the *jarl* does not oppose the plot against Óláfr *sænski*; he is likely to gain from the king's loss. Ingibjörg's role in this matter might function as a literary device, representing the voice of public (or narratorial) opinion, prompting Rognvaldr to act as well as give his reasons for doing so, but her grudge reminds the audience about Óláfr *sænski*'s past dealings with the Norwegian people.

It is clear from Óláfr *sænski*'s speech at the Swedish assembly that he is depicted as regarding Ingibjörg bearing considerable responsibility for what he claims is Rognvaldr's treasonous support of Óláfr *digri*: "[Óláfr *sænski*] segir, at allt slíkt hlaut hann af áeggjan Ingibjargar, konu sinnar" [Óláfr *sænski* says that this was all at the instigation of his wife, Ingibjörg].⁶⁹ Ingibjörg is thus twice explicitly said to have incited (*eggjað*) her husband to act; this suggests that her appeal was considered a formal speech act since it is narrated as having become public knowledge. Although Rognvaldr decides on the details of the plan, his wife is depicted as having achieved her own separate agenda in the matter; their interests ultimately coincide. It is unclear from her portrayal whether the narrator regards Ingibjörg as being within her rights by her participation in the strategizing, either as an aristocratic woman, that is, being of royal descent and the wife of a *jarl*, or simply as a woman whose gender role it is to whet her male kin to act. Considering that the narrator makes a substantial effort to give logical reasons and motivations for Ingibjörg's decision to encourage her husband to undermine his king, I suggest that, whether legitimate or not, her actions are viewed as justifiable; the question of legitimacy relies partly on the appropriateness of whetting as a culturally determined speech act.

Having ensured her husband's support, Ingibjörg consequently helps Hjalti to gain an audience at the Swedish court by sending him with her token (*jarteikn*) as well as a bag of silver that he is to present to the king as tax in order to win him over. By this she is portrayed as showing a great deal of shrewdness, identifying the economic interests that lie at the center of the dispute and finding a way to capitalize on them to her party's advantage. It is not clear whether the silver comes out of Ingibjörg's own funds or her husband's, but whichever the case, she seems to have the right to distribute it. Ingibjörg also works through other unofficial channels, sending word to the Swedish

princess, Ingigerðr Óláfsdóttir, asking her to help Hjalti.⁷⁰ This suggests that she has already recognized the possibility of a marriage between Ingigerðr and Óláfr *digri*, and thus she involves the princess as well as helping Hjalti secure an ally at the Swedish court.

Ingibjörg remains a presence throughout the *Friðgerðarsaga* dispute and a pivotal participant although she does not play a leading role after her initial involvement. She uses a number of strategies in order to further her agenda: she persuades her husband to act by putting forward rational arguments as well as prompting him in what is probably a formal incitement speech, she provides economic resources to enable Hjalti to gain the king's favor, and she enlists Princess Ingigerðr as an ally.

Ingigerðr Óláfsdóttir

Following Ingibjörg's initiative, Princess Ingigerðr and Hjalti privately discuss the possibility of reconciling her father and Óláfr *digri* on numerous occasions. Although she is not optimistic that the king will be well-disposed toward the idea, she still makes an honest effort to appeal to his better judgment. She suggests to Óláfr *sænski* that he abandon his aim to conquer barren Norway, reconcile himself with Óláfr *digri*, and focus on regaining lands previously held in Russia. Hjalti had previously tried to persuade the king to adopt the same course of action, but their attempts serve only to provoke Óláfr *sænski*'s anger. However, Hjalti does not let this discourage him; he remains at the Swedish court and continues his talks with the princess.

Hjalti's next step is to test the waters carefully to see whether Ingigerðr would be open to marriage with the Norwegian Óláfr. The princess blushes a little, considers the matter for a while, and then replies *óbrátt ok stilliliga* "slowly and calmly," and with what is probably false modesty:

Ekki hefi ek hugfest svör fyrir mér um þat, því at ek ætla, at ek myna eigi þurfa til at taka þeira svara, en ef Óláfr er svá at sér gorr um alla hluti sem þú segir frá honum, þá mynda ek eigi kunna óeskja minn mann á annan veg, ef eigi er þat, at þér mynið heldr hóli gilt hafa í marga staði.⁷¹

[I do not have ready answers on that matter since I do not expect that I will need to provide them, but if Óláfr is in every way as you have described him, then I would not wish my husband to be any other way, if you have not praised him rather too much.]

As shrewd as Ingigerðr is portrayed, the saga author is perhaps showing her as being motivated by a separate agenda: through her advocacy she could acquire a king as a husband. Otherwise she would hardly be shown helping Hjalti or making several attempts at persuading her father of the sense of his plan. After this suggestion of marriage, Björn *stallari* and Rognvaldr become involved in the matter once again; Ingigerðr states that her father is the only one who can

give her away in marriage, but otherwise Rognvaldr is the relative she looks to for trustworthy advice. She thus hints to Óláfr *digri*'s envoys that she is open to circumventing her father's authority if Rognvaldr were to give her his support. Ingigerðr's motivation is clearly portrayed as personal; no other noble suitors seem to be on the horizon, and she probably does not want to run the risk of marrying beneath her rank. As Jochens has pointed out, princesses were often married to lower-born men, as in the case of Ingibjörg Tryggvadóttir, a princess who marries a *jarl*.⁷² Thus Ingigerðr is neither depicted as being driven by a sense of duty nor obedience to her father; her primary loyalty is likely to herself and her ambition of making a suitably royal match.

After it has been established that Ingigerðr is willing to use herself as a peace offering in the proposed reconciliation between the two Scandinavian royal families, even against the will of her father, Óláfr *digri*'s allies proceed to conclude the matter at the Swedish assembly, using the wise Þorgnýr *løgmaðr*, the relative and foster-father of Rognvaldr, as their spokesman. Þorgnýr demands that the king follow the will of the Swedes and make peace with Óláfr *digri* under the threat of a revolt, and the dispute is settled with Óláfr *sænski* grudgingly submitting to these demands. However, nothing comes of the marriage between Ingigerðr and Óláfr *digri* because of her father's refusal to bow to the Swedish assembly's coercion; instead, he calls everything off and quickly marries her to King Jarisleifr in Russia, a satisfactory outcome for Ingigerðr in terms of a suitable match (although perhaps not as good as marrying a future saint).⁷³ Óláfr *digri* ultimately marries her illegitimate half-sister Ástriðr; the narrator of *Heimskringla* presents this as a great victory for the king as it is Rognvaldr who betrothes Ástriðr to Óláfr without the consent of her father to his humiliation and anger.

In the carefully drawn picture of the events related in the *Friðgerðarsaga*, Ingigerðr is one of the main players. However, matters are complicated when her efforts to settle the dispute by becoming a "peace-weaver" are not productive in the end; the princess does not have the power to realize her plans. She makes a failed attempt to persuade her father to settle with Óláfr *digri*, and then tries with others to arrange to marry him with or without the king's consent, an agreement which the king accepts under duress and has no intention of fulfilling. Although a row between father and daughter concerning Óláfr *sænski*'s hunting prowess is the ostensible reason for his breaking off the engagement, the fact that he had already been keeping Óláfr *digri* waiting for his bride all summer on the border between the two kingdoms shows that he had no intention to make good his promise. However, Ingigerðr does wield some degree of power, although clearly

not legitimately, when, after her betrothal, she succeeds in making her father promise to let her have one man of her choice to go with her to Russia. After he has agreed, she announces that she wishes this person to be Rognvaldr *jarl*, enabling him to escape from Sweden unscathed despite his involvement in the clandestine plot to marry Ástriðr to Óláfr *digri*, an act which Óláfr *sænski* regards as treason. The king replies: “Annan veg hefi ek hugat at launa Rognvaldi jarli dróttinsvikin, þau er hann fór til Nóregs með dóttur mína ok seldi hana þar til frillu þeim inum digra manni ok þeim, er hann vissi várn óvin mestan” [I planned on repaying Rognvaldr *jarl* differently for the treason he committed when he brought my daughter to Norway and handed her over as a concubine to that fat man, whom he knew was our greatest enemy] but nevertheless, he keeps his promise to his daughter.⁷⁴ Thus although unsuccessful in her efforts to marry Óláfr *digri*, Ingigerðr’s maneuvering ultimately manages to secure her own interest, compelling the king to find her a suitable husband and to save the skin of her ally.

With the exception of *Heimskringla*, all the historiographical sources that relate the events of the *Friðgerðarsaga* (i.e., *Ágrip*, *Fagrskinna*, the *Legendary Saga*, also known as *Helgisagan*) cite the father’s irrational anger as an explanation for the end of Ingigerðr and Óláfr *digri*’s royal engagement. In the *Legendary Saga*, Óláfr *sænski* is initially portrayed as a sensible man, and when Hjalti suggests a peace settlement with the union, the king decides that this is a good solution, consults the princess, who also approves, and betrothes her to Óláfr *digri*. The Swedish king’s only provision is that Óláfr *digri* come to meet him, and show humility and willingness to reconcile. The abrupt termination of their engagement occurs after a hunting trip, when Ingigerðr compares her father unfavorably to Óláfr *digri* after he had boasted of his success in hunting. The king angrily replies that as a punishment, she will never have Óláfr, which, as Hans Schottmann notes, makes much less sense psychologically than the *Heimskringla* version.⁷⁵ As Schottmann compellingly argues, *Heimskringla*’s sophisticated and carefully constructed narrative is more convincing in literary terms than that of the other versions.⁷⁶ This version adds characters not present in any of his sources (i.e., Rognvaldr, Ingibjörg, and Þórgnýr) and develops the Þórgnýr episode in order to rationalize the king’s anger and prepare the audience for his decision to break off the engagement. Rather than depicting it as caused by his bruised ego, *Heimskringla* fully explains the rationale behind Óláfr *sænski*’s entirely political decision to shun Óláfr *digri* (on behalf of his daughter), including his stalling tactics during the summer; this narrative’s author, usually sensitive to the underlying political factors that motivate actions, shows that Óláfr *sænski*, who considers Óláfr *digri* an

enemy well beneath him in status, never intended the marriage to go through.⁷⁷

Nothing comes of Óláfr *digri*'s marriage to Ingigerðr, but the king nevertheless manages to form a union, albeit a less prestigious one, with a member of the Swedish royal family, the illegitimate Ástriðr Óláfsdóttir, discussed previously. Her portrait in medieval sources is consistently that of an exceptionally assertive woman, as the story about her performance at the Swedish assembly shows. The *Legendary Saga* includes an episode after Ingigerðr has been packed off to Russia in which Ástriðr travels to Norway with her foster-father, Egill, presumably without permission from her father, to meet Óláfr *digri*. The king has locked himself up in a attic, inconsolable at the loss of Ingigerðr. Ástriðr makes several attempts at persuading Óláfr to cheer up and resume his duties as king, telling him that this is the express wish of her sister: “[hon] mællte, hærri, at þer skillduð higgia af harme oc glæðia vini yðra oc taka upp goða siðvæniu, sem yðr byriar. Gersc mikil briostaðr, sem kononge somer oc hans tign hœfver” [she said, sir, that you ought to quit sulking and make your friends cheerful and assume proper behavior, as fitting. Act noble-mindedly as a king ought to and as befits his rank].⁷⁸ On her second visit, Ástriðr gives Óláfr a shirt embroidered with gold, claiming that it is sent by Ingigerðr along with her offers of eternal friendship. On the third occasion, in a striking move, she proposes marriage:

En sva er mer boðet af Ingigjærði, at yðr skilldim ver i hværn stað virða um fram alla menn. En firir þa soc, at þu ert sva harmfængenn, þa er æ þess mæiri þorf, yðr at glæðia. Þo varð æigi su hamingia konongs vars, at sa radahagr skildi fram koma, sem ætlaðr var, þa mætte enn nokcora bot a þui vinna, firir þui at æigi man æinmællt um vera, hvar ovirðing er mæiri, su er Olafir konongr gerðe yðr i brigðmælonom eða þesse, at hann skal ægi raða eða forsio firir hava firir vara hond. En hælldr en æigi faer þu glæði þina, þa man ec þat til læggia með umræðom Ingigjærðar, at fastna mik siolf yðr utan hans vilia ne rada. Oc er bætra, at biðia goðz raðs oc goðz konongs, en æiga ovirðilegan mann, þo at konongs namn bere. En þo at þat bere a, at hon [Ingigerðr] se mestr skarungr, þa man þat vitra manna orð, at su er gogfagt, er þionar.⁷⁹

[But I was bid by Ingigerðr to regard you in every way above all other men. Because you are so stricken with grief, there is even more need to cheer you up. Although it was not our king's good fortune that the intended match came into being, there are certain things we can do to improve this, for people's opinions will differ as to which is more of a disgrace, the one that King Óláfr caused you when he broke his promise, or that he will not decide or advise on my marriage. But much rather than you not regaining your good cheer, I suggest, upon Ingigerðr's advice, that I betroth myself to you without his will or counsel. And it is better to propose a good match and a good king, than to marry a man without honor, even though he bears the title of a king. Although it is true that Ingigerðr is brave in character, wise men say that she who serves is the noblest of all.]

King Óláfr is here depicted as neglecting his royal duties because of his heartbreak over Ingigerðr. Ástriðr tries to persuade him to follow her advice by reminding him of the proper behavior of a king and appealing to his love for her sister; the gold-embroidered shirt,

ostensibly a gift from Ingigerðr, appears to be a courtly love trope.⁸⁰ Ástriðr then makes her final speech, again claiming to be sent by Ingigerðr, and although she acknowledges the king's sorrow, she reminds him that by marrying her without her father's consent, Óláfr can avenge the humiliation of having lost out on marrying her sister. Finally, she highlights promises to practice wifely obedience, which seems to make her an even more attractive match. After this speech, King Óláfr brightens up, marries Ástriðr, and resumes his royal duties.

Two themes are noteworthy in Ástriðr's discourse: first, the repeated evocation of Ingigerðr and her blessing, which perhaps reveals her aim to associate the two sisters in a positive way in the king's mind, emotionally, as an object of his love, and politically, since both sisters have sided with their father's opponents. Second, Ástriðr's proposal to Óláfr is startlingly subversive; as Jochens has argued, the idea that women should even give their consent in marriage did not exist until the late twelfth or thirteenth century in Scandinavia although it is applied anachronistically by authors to earlier periods.⁸¹ Perhaps the account of Ástriðr's bold proposal to Óláfr in the saga (whether historically accurate or not) is influenced by romance: Rosemary Power suggests that the unconventional idea of a woman initiating a relationship, specifically a sexual one, with a man, is imported into Old Norse literature from Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval*, which would have been available in Norway in the *Strengleikar* collection of translated *lais*; the detail of the gold embroidery on the shirt further supports this suggestion.⁸²

This extraordinary account does not appear in *Heimskringla*, where it is Rognvaldr who betrothes the princess to Óláfr *digri* after she has given her consent, but the episode is interpolated in some of the manuscripts of the *Ólafs saga helga hin sérstaka* (*Separate Saga of St Óláfr*). One version, preserved in Bergsbók (dated to ca. 1400), adds details which give the scene a greater interest, for example, noting that Ástriðr covers her face with a veil when she visited the king for the first and second time (another romance trope), and it depicts her as even bolder than in the *Legendary Saga*.⁸³ Ástriðr declares in this account that she traveled to Norway against the advice of everyone else, and she admits to being persistent in her attempts to win the king over. On the third visit, she uncovers her face and proceeds with her final address, pointing out to the king that although she is not as highborn as Ingigerðr, he will be no worse off without her. Her final argument manages to raise the king's interest:

enn þott adr se gior mikil mvnr þa mvn sv brat tignvzt sem þer gengr nørst ok drotning er yfer ollv landi med þer. veit ek ath sva mvn þickia sem eingi kona mvni sva hafa til mannz melt sem ek ok villda ek ok sva þvi at ek ętla ath ek eigia þeim mvn til ędra mannz at męla sem ek legg meiri stvnd a enn adrar þicki mer ok meiri vegr at męla diarflega til þess mannz er mer er ęfinleg giefat at en bida hins or stad er meir dregr til

[Although we were previously unequal in status, the woman who is closest to you and queen over the entire kingdom will immediately become the noblest. I know that it will be said that no woman has ever addressed a man as I have and I prefer it that way, since I think that I should address all the more noble man, the more differently I act from other women. I consider it a virtue to speak boldly to the man who is my everlasting fortune rather than to wait for another who is a more equal match.]

Ástriðr here declares that it is likely that no woman has ever spoken thus to a man; furthermore, although her rank does not equal his, this will be insignificant after their marriage, since the woman nearest to the king in status, that is, his queen, is the noblest of all. She admits that this is unusually ambitious but she would rather boldly address the man who will be her eternal good fortune than wait for a proposal from someone more equal to her in status. Heinrichs reads Ástriðr's statement that Óláfr will be her *efnleg giefra* "everlasting fortune" in the context of his future saintliness, but considering Óláfr's demonstrably weak position vis-à-vis his Swedish opponent, it could equally be seen as a form of flattery intended to clinch Ástriðr's emphatic argument.⁸⁵

A third version of this episode appears in AM 61 fol., dated to ca. 1400, and in Tómasskinna (GKS 1008 fol.), dated to the same period.⁸⁶ In this version, Ástriðr is less feisty and meeker than in Bergsbók; nevertheless, she appears as strikingly forceful in her last, urgent request to the king to agree to their union in order to prevent warfare and the deaths of many Christian men. The redactor juxtaposes Ástriðr's *spakligt* "wise" counsel and patient efforts to negotiate an agreement with what she describes as the king's *þra lyndi* "stubbornness" in his refusal to accept this less advantageous match than originally suggested, thereby risking war with Sweden.⁸⁷ Ástriðr's positive portrait in this redaction echoes women's peaceful role in the fornaldarsögur outlined in [chapter 1](#).

The *Heimskringla* author's motives for omitting Ástriðr's proposal to Óláfr in favor of depicting Rognvaldr jarl as the primary facilitator of their union are ambiguous. Heinrichs has suggested that the saga author did not want to portray the king as a lovelorn melancholic.⁸⁸ Perhaps he found the idea of Ástriðr proposing to the king outrageous and unlikely, or, more probable, he decided to focus on the political struggle between Óláfr *digri*, Rognvaldr and Óláfr *sænski*, sidelining Ástriðr's role in this. If, as Bagge has suggested, *Heimskringla*'s version of the episode is favorable toward Óláfr *digri* and aims at presenting his marriage to Ástriðr as a victory over Óláfr *sænski*, concealing the humiliation he suffers when the engagement to Ingigerðr is broken off, then reducing Ástriðr's function and increasing Óláfr *digri*'s and Rognvaldr's role would probably be a part of that strategy.⁸⁹

These versions of Ástriðr's excursion to Norway agree with her

image elsewhere in medieval sources as a self-assured, intelligent, independent, and eloquent woman, suggested by the beginning of *Magnúss saga ins góða* in *Heimskringla*, mentioned previously, where she persuades the Swedish assembly to support her stepson Magnús in his bid for the Norwegian throne, and by her subversive behavior toward her husband in *Óttars þáttur svarta*. This is a short tale interpolated into some versions of the *Separate Saga* in which, to her husband's dismay, Ástríðr rewards the Icelandic skald (court poet) Óttarr for the verses he composed about her.⁹⁰ In this narrative, Óttarr, who had been a court poet at her father King Óláfr *sænski*'s court when Ástríðr was younger, and thus harbored warm feelings towards her, is due to be executed for his poem, considered an insult to Ástríðr. During his imprisonment, Óttarr manages to change the verses and make them more appropriate and palatable to the king. He also composes a *drápa* “praise poem” in the king's honor, and on the appointed day, he performs both poems for the court. The king likes the *drápa* and rewards Óttarr with his life and a gold bracelet, while Ástríðr offers him a gold ring for her poem. The king reproaches his wife for rewarding such offensive verses, but she replies (according to most manuscripts) that she wishes to compensate Óttarr for the *lof* “praise” he gave her, just like the king, an argument that he grudgingly accepts. In the *Bergsbók* version, she adds a comment about their unequal status:

vel mvn mer þat synazt soma herra at ganga epter ydrvm ðemvm þer gafvd Ottari gyll hring ok þat er mycklv var meira er lifit var fyrer þat er hann sēmdi ydr með drapv. nv mvn synazt mikil mvnr kvēðanna enn meiri  nnanna þott hann tacki af mer litit fingr gyll j ombon sinna verka.⁹¹

[I consider it very fitting, sir, to follow your example. You gave Óttarr a gold ring, and—what was much more valuable—his life, in reward for his honoring you with a *drápa*. Now the difference between the poems will be considered great but even more so the difference between the rewards although he receives from me a little [finger] ring in return for his work.]

Thus Ástríðr points out that she is only following the king's example, although her compensation to Óttarr is disproportionate to the amount Óláfr gave him. Implicit is the accusation that Óláfr holds double standards for himself and the queen, suggesting that Ástríðr considers herself to have, if not equal, then at least some degree of authority to bestow honor upon skalds at court, independently and at her own discretion. This is a claim to power disputed by the king, perhaps not in principle, but rather in these particular circumstances; after all, Óttarr's verses about Ástríðr had previously been considered offensive by everyone at court (and they were probably illegal). Whatever the case, in this episode Ástríðr asserts her autonomy and official, legitimate position as queen, as a full member of the royal household and a power player in her own right.

Conclusion

In the many *Friðgerðarsaga* versions, royal and noble women are depicted as employing various strategies, primarily verbal and economic, to wield power in pursuit of their own agendas; individual authors arrange, develop, and perhaps invent the details of this episode according to their own narrative aims. Royal women are in the unusual position of having access to material resources and, as wives and daughters, to members of the ruling class. Whether kings or noblemen, these men are, in their struggle for power, primarily concerned with furthering their own interests; so too are the women, and these do not always coincide. By identifying these competing interests and negotiating the subtle currents of power, women are depicted as able to cooperate with the rulers, directly or through representatives, or to undermine them by surreptitiously working with the opposing party. In his maneuverings, Hjalti Skeggjason is aided by two women, suggesting that approaching a king through his female kin—queens and princesses—is seen as a potentially successful strategy for winning his favor. The difference between the sisters' success in achieving their goal, marriage to Óláfr *digri*, depends on how strongly they are under their father's influence; Ástríðr's freedom of movement in some versions of the narrative enables her to remove herself from her father's authority while Ingigerðr is unable to circumvent his power over her. Whether they fail or succeed in carrying out their own agendas, royal women in every version of the *Friðgerðarsaga* are active participants in international and domestic politics.

These kinds of strategies are available to royal and aristocratic women more widely in *Heimskringla* in order to gain power to operate independently from their fathers, husbands, and sons; a few are granted official, legitimate authority to act in the public sphere using the kinds of power classified by Weber. Thus Ástríðr uses both traditional and charismatic domination at the Swedish assembly, and in *Óttars þáttur svarta* she claims a stake in court politics. However, many instances of women wielding power are difficult to analyze in terms of legitimacy; such legitimacy must be regarded as relative. A number of powerful queens are depicted negatively; however, there is no universal stigmatization of women who gain access to power. Rather, some queens receive hostile treatment because of their unjust or overbearing rule (resulting in their portrait as *regina iniusta*, cf. *rex iniustus*), or because they have foreign origins.

Other prerequisites for women to gain power are economic resources, charismatic personal traits, freedom of movement (especially in Ástríðr's case), and a certain degree of mental independence. Finally, *Realpolitik* emerges as an important factor;

royal women's success in furthering their own agenda seems to depend, first, on the woman's ability correctly to analyze the situation and the interests fundamentally at stake, and to act strategically based on this analysis, and, second, on whether her interests coincide with or clash with those of the party with which the author's sympathy lies.

CHAPTER 5

THE FEMALE RULER

The social changes that took place in the wake of Iceland's formal entry into the Norwegian monarchy in 1262–4, in conjunction with the influx and popularity of romance from the British Isles and Europe, brought about a transformation in the country's cultural and political discourse. The effect of these developments can be found in indigenous Icelandic literature, which from the late thirteenth century onward became even more diverse than before. New types of popular texts emerged, bringing with them new images of women, especially the *meykongr* or maiden-king, a figure which features prominently in many of the late-medieval indigenous romances, (*frumsamdar*) *riddarasögur*. This (sub)genre is a fusion of different narrative elements, profoundly influenced by the structure and themes of foreign romance literature but containing motifs originating in native heroic legend, where images of independent women abound.¹

The maiden-king narrative appears in a significant number of indigenous romances along with several texts usually categorized as *fornaldarsögur*, but which contain episodes that feature the motif.² They uniquely focus on a female protagonist and follow a paradigm of a young, noble, unmarried woman, usually depicted as haughty, cruel, and, early in the tradition, armed. She rules her own kingdom, rejects all her suitors and mistreats them physically, verbally, or both. However, ultimately the male hero finds a way to outwit and conquer the maiden-king, sometimes subjecting her to equal violence, and the story concludes with a traditional ending in which the two protagonists (for the main female character plays a role equal in importance to the man) marry, though sometimes they do not live so happily-ever-after from the woman's point of view.

In this chapter, I will give an overview of the traits and characteristics of the maiden-kings, and analyze what the overwhelmingly patriarchal sagas featuring this motif reveal about the preoccupations of late medieval Icelandic society. These primarily touch on issues such as gender roles, courtship, and marriage, these being the focus of these sagas; as mentioned in the introduction, the sagas served an ideological function, assimilating newly imported courtly values and behavior for Icelandic audiences, and in the process defining and upholding appropriate behavior for men and women of

the dominant class. These narratives are fundamentally conservative: the ideal woman who is submissive to her father and husband is foregrounded, and a common result of the maiden-king's departure from this standard is her rape or other mistreatment and consequent loss of reputation. However, the process of assimilating new ideas is not seamless. In scenes where the male hero fails to win the woman he woos, and where she manages (temporarily) to gain the upper hand, the texts also reveal male anxieties deriving from redefined social status and power. Finally, having discussed the maiden-king sagas' patriarchal discourse, I will look at how one text in particular, *Nitida saga*, subverts the genre's standard pattern, providing a proto-feminist counterimage to the subjected *meykongr* of most of these narratives. This saga shows that the ideas of the sexes perpetuated in the more conservative texts were not universally accepted but rather a matter of fierce contestation in the medieval period.

Maiden-Kings in the Indigenous *Riddarasögur*

Maiden-kings in the *riddarasögur* possess many courtly female virtues such as wisdom, eloquence, and courtesy, as well as skills such as embroidery; but contrary to wise royal women in the *fornaldarsögur* (who are usually married queens) they do not keep within their traditional female role.³ In the spirit of the valkyries Brynhildr and Sigrún who appear in eddic heroic poetry, maiden-kings show autonomy by disobeying their fathers, mistreating suitors, and pursuing their own agenda; specifically avoiding marriage and ruling their kingdom.⁴ This female image is not consistent with the position of women largely endorsed in Continental romance, which is certainly secondary to that of men although not necessarily passive; thus eventually the maiden-king needs to be subdued and assimilated to this female role.⁵ Before the maiden-king's downfall is discussed, I will examine what attributes characterize them in the early parts of the sagas.

Some maiden-kings explicitly wield legitimate rule. In *Sigurðar saga þögla*, Sedentiana's parents decide to leave the kingdom to serve God, bestowing its government, including both responsibilities and benefits, on their daughter. She calls herself king and this arrangement is formally accepted by the court:

feck hann [Flores kongr] til eignar og forrædes dottur sinne bæde lonnd aull og lausafe borgir og kastala med skottum og skyldum. og let alla landz hofdinngia sueria henne trunadareid suo sem hun uære einualldzkongr yfir landinu. Allir uilldu þui giarna jata sem kongr villde vera lata. war hun þu til hasætis leidd . . . Sedentiana settizt j sinna borg. og snytz nú til hennar oll Rikisstiornn.⁶

[King Flóres gave to his daughter ownership and rule both of land and chattel, cities and castles, with taxes and duties, and had all the noblemen swear an oath of loyalty to her as

if she were the sole monarch of the country. Everyone wished to acquiesce to the king's commands, and subsequently she was led to the high seat . . . [King Flóres Sedentiana took up residence in her city, as well as full government.]

In *Sigrarðs saga frækna*, *Nitida saga* and others, the father dies, leaving the kingdom to the maiden-king, his only heir; in *Sigrarðs saga*, the princess then calls together an assembly and has her authority formally declared, simultaneously assuming the male name Ingi.⁷ Séréna, the female ruler of *Clári saga*, is more or less de facto ruler of her father's kingdom: she is so wise that her joint government with her father seems to be accepted as legitimate.⁸ *Dínus saga dramláta* is perhaps the most unclear about female rule: the princess Philotemia (whose name means "love of honor") persuades her spineless father to indulge her every whim without ever being depicted as a ruler. Thus although some of the maiden-kings are not monarchs in name and their fathers are the kingdom's male figurehead, they effectively govern the kingdom or are able to manipulate the king in power. The crucial element is that the maiden-king is empowered to achieve her own aims and rule in practice if not in name.

Independent women, both maiden-kings (i.e., royal women who are sole heirs to the crown) and widows of kings, are depicted as competent, if often overbearing rulers; their kingdoms seem to thrive despite the lack of a male sovereign. Nitida's realm, for example, is infinitely richer and more prosperous than that of her suitor, and she sees no reason to marry.⁹ In some cases women are better rulers than men: the mother of the foolish Viktor in *Viktors saga* is contrasted with her son: she tries to curb her adolescent son's spending habits, and in his absence manages the kingdom out of near bankruptcy after Viktor had drained nearly all its economic resources by squandering them on feasting.¹⁰ Her success is perhaps due to the experience gained in years of marriage to a king, in contrast to the young maiden-king's relative inexperience. However, wisdom is a useful attribute for all maiden-kings: Nitida's intelligence enables her to protect her kingdom not only by wise rule but also by building concrete defenses.¹¹ Another strategy for (self)protection is the employment of learned magic; some maiden-kings make use of supernatural means such as spells, objects, and sleeping potions in order to evade marriage and/or being bedded by the suitor; skills in enchantment serve to protect both their virginity and their kingdom, a feature that also appears in Continental romance.¹² This evidence, along with the fact that the maiden-king is often appointed and uncomplainingly accepted by her subjects as ruler, indicates that women were not seen as innately incompetent at governing kingdoms.¹³

The maiden-king possesses many courtly virtues fitting for a monarch, such as generosity and hospitality, as emphasized in an

encomiastic description of King Arthur found in *Móttuls saga*.¹⁴ She often treats the suitor honorably at first and receives him with appropriate decorum, becoming unfriendly only when he has the audacity to propose marriage.¹⁵ Although the welcome reception displays the maiden-king's nobility and courtliness, she may have additional motives, seen in the *Helga þáttur* of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, a *fornaldarsaga* containing a maiden-king episode in a mythical-legendary context. Helgi's arrival in Saxland takes the maiden-king Olof by surprise and because she does not have an army in place to repel his men, Olof's strategy is to invite him to a feast to buy time and devise a plan: "kom henni þetta ovart, ok var einginn kostur lidi at safna. Tök hun þá þennann af sem betur var að hun bjódur Helga kongi til veitslu með öllu lidi sínu" [this took her by surprise, and there was no chance to gather a force. She took the better alternative to invite king Helgi to a feast with his entire retinue].¹⁶ At the banquet, Olof gets the invading king so intoxicated that he passes out, and she is able to stab him with a sleep-thorn and (temporarily) rid herself of him, ignominiously having him tarred and feathered and sent away, stuffed into a bag. Conversely, in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, Þornbjörg's demeanor is by no means friendly when Hrólfr and his retinue arrive at Ullaragr, and she rightly considers herself more than capable of dealing with them. Her reaction to Hrólfr's proposal is to ignore it and instead offer him hospitality for one month, implying that he is not only beneath her in social status, but so impoverished that he needs her charity.¹⁷ When he impertinently repeats his proposal, adding that he knows she is a woman, the maiden-king is infuriated, a battle breaks out, and Hrólfr and his men are driven away in shame. In a courtly environment, the suitor is not considered dangerous and etiquette is observed at first, but when the same plots are set in the North, the immediate threat to the maiden-king's independence posed by the suitor's designs on her becomes more transparent.¹⁸

Whereas women's wisdom is appreciated and praised in many Old Norse-Icelandic texts, including some *riddarasögur*, it seems that the maiden-king's mental qualities cross the limits of what can be tolerated in terms of women's knowledge; Kalinke points out that the maiden-king's wisdom leads to her "overweening pride" in what seems to be a demonizing process.¹⁹ This hostility is expressed at length in *Sigurðar saga þögla*, in which Sedentiana considers herself to be superior to anyone else:

Enn þá er þessi hinn dyrliga mæringur sig þrydda og skrydda öllum heimsins
natturgjöfum vinnufram aðrar jungfrur j heiminum með snilld orða og öllum fróðskap. Þá
tók hennar metnadir og ofse að þrutna. Suo hun formade nálíga allar tignar frur og
tíginna manna sonu suo miog að þann visse hun þungu fæddan j norduralfunne
veraldarinnar að henne þætte ecki full minkann j að samteingjast meður nokkurre

[But when this glorious maiden realized she was adorned and embellished with all the world's natural gifts, more than other princesses in the world, including eloquence and all knowledge, then her pride and tyranny began to swell so that she treated all the noble ladies and sons of noblemen with such contempt that she knew of no one born in the world's northern continent with whom she did not consider shameful to associate with any degree of regard.]

Sedentiana's arrogance only becomes worse with time, turning into excessive cruelty when she has people murdered for disobeying her wishes.²¹ In *Dínus saga dramláta*, despite her father's warnings, Philotemia seeks out Dínus in order to humiliate him by testing her knowledge against his, and the rest of the saga deals with the couple's blows and counterblows in revenge for the previous injury, ending with Philotemia's total defeat. She reflects that because she disobeyed her father and attempted to rise above her subordinate position, she deserves her unhappy fate: "maklega er mier falled seiger hun, og vijst være mier betur, ad eg hefde ei til slijkz ötijsma fædd vered, veij sie þeim er j mote brijst fœdurlegumm vilia, og er eg þui verd suijvirðingar" [it serves me right, she says, and I would be better off had I never been born; woe is she who goes against her father's will, and therefore I am worthy of disgrace].²² Thus the maiden-king narratives warn against women using their learning in defiance of patriarchal authority, encouraging instead meekness, humility, and deference to their father's wishes. Wisdom is only approved of as long as it has the purpose of benefiting the hero or the community rather than empowering women to pursue their independent agenda.

Another recurrent negative attribute in these narratives is the maiden-kings' avarice. Despite ruling renowned and powerful kingdoms, presumably with plenty of treasure at their disposal, they are often consumed with greed for a particular object in the possession of the suitor, and this greed is often their downfall.²³ This characteristic is chrystallized in *Clári saga*, where Séréna notices Clárus's glorious tents and is instantly filled with an intense desire to possess them, "því at hana lysti að eiga hvað er hún sá dýrmætt" [for she longed to possess everything valuable that she saw].²⁴ In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, Olof is said to be *kuenna fiegjornust* "the most avaricious of women" and King Helgi takes advantage of this trait in order to avenge himself on her, luring Olof into the forest with promises of treasure but instead abducting and raping her.²⁵ Women's desire for treasure and riches is depicted negatively, encouraging the audience to regard them as evil and sinful in a Christian sense (since greed is one of the seven deadly sins), and to rejoice when it leads to their oppression.

Women's access to treasure is not just crucial in terms of satisfying their purportedly inherent "female desire for beautiful things."²⁶ In

Völsunga saga, Brynhildr, the likely model for later maiden-kings, relates the circumstances of her marriage to Gunnarr, forced upon Brynhildr by her father: “Váru þá tveir kostir fyrir hendi, at ek munda þeim verða at giptask sem hann vildi, eða vera án alls fjár ok hans vináttu” [then I had two alternatives, either I would have to marry the man he preferred, or be utterly deprived of money and his friendship].²⁷ She is threatened with the loss of her father’s support, and, more importantly, the loss of her inheritance, both land and riches. Thus women’s desire for treasures suggests that more is at stake than simply the possession of fine objects: financial resources are a fundamental means of accessing power, and consequently achieving and retaining independence.

The most negative attributes of the maiden-king are, thus, too much intelligence and/or learning and greed. Women’s knowledge and access to resources—if used independently and not for the sole benefit of male kin—are frowned upon and seen as a threat because they entail the possibility of independence and self-determination. All power that women gain seems automatically to provoke anxieties about weakened male power. By depicting the maiden-king as arrogant and greedy, these negative attributes serve as a warning to keep women in the audience in their place. That these features cause so much disapproval surely indicate that they both enable women to gain power and are a genuine contemporary issue; the possibility of heiresses and widows acquiring money and property must have been present and even strong in some circumstances.²⁸

Women, Rulership, and Male Roles

Despite the maiden-king’s competence in governing, *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* makes explicit how gender distinguishes her from a prince: the fact that the maiden-king is single makes her vulnerable to external physical threats.²⁹ Pointing out that since the king will not be alive forever to protect the kingdom against invasions or malevolent suitors, Þornbjörg assumes the role of a male heir, requesting from her father one-third of Sweden so that she can practice her military and ruling skills.³⁰ Þornbjörg’s reasons for behaving like a man are seemingly rational; she is the sole heir to her father’s throne and has no other male kin to defend the kingdom in the event of his death. However, King Eiríkr is said to grant her this wish because he has come to fear his daughter’s domineering and zealous temperament, which he considers a risk:

Konungr hugsar nú orð meyjarinnar, finnr þat, at hún var ráðgjörn ok stórlát. Þótti honum eigi ólíkligt, at hann ok ríki hans fengi ónádír af hennar ofsa ok kappgirnd, tekr þat ráðs, at hann fær henni til forráða þriðjung af ríki sínu.³¹

[The king considers the maiden's words, and finds her domineering and conceited. He thought it not unlikely that he and his kingdom would get into trouble on account of her tyranny and zeal, and he decides to give her one-third of his realm to rule.]

Given that Þornbjörg's anxieties about dealing with foreign invaders are entirely reasonable, the father's negative attitude reveals a narratorial hostility toward her adoption of a male role.³²

Maiden-kings in the romances differ from Þornbjörg in that although they venture out of the traditional female sphere (with the obvious exception of the act of ruling), they do not otherwise perform traditional male activities. Romances distinguish between ruling and fighting. On one hand, the maiden-king, otherwise courtly and feminine, carries status as monarch, destabilizing a hierarchy where persons of only one gender are legitimately entitled to official power. Thus in *Sigrarðs saga frækna*, the maiden-king Ingi(gerðr)'s renowned skill with the needle is one of the reasons why the suitor, Sigrarðr, seeks her out.³³ On the other hand, it would be hard to imagine the warlike Þornbjörg sitting in her fortress embroidering before she succumbs to Hrólfr; indeed, symbolically, it is exactly this female pastime to which she turns after he has conquered her. Some sagas do depict noble female characters engaging in warfare, but this is limited to activities off the battlefield such as strategizing.³⁴

When it comes to fighting, several royal women dress and behave like men, engaging in knightly activities, but in that case they do not rule.³⁵ *Mírmanns saga* is a peculiar hybrid of hagiography and romance; Mírmann converts to Christianity against the wish of his pagan parents, and Cecilia's unusual male-coded behavior is explained by divine intervention: "enn þui giordi hun svo ad Gud er alla hluti veit fyrer vissi ad hun munde þess þurfa ädur lýki" [but she did this because God, who knows all things in advance, knew she would need these (skills) before the end].³⁶ Indeed it turns out that she must undertake a mission to rescue her bewitched husband from a bigamous marriage with a lustful stepmother figure. Cecilia is reminiscent of the married female warriors in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* and *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, in which Þornbjörg and Randalín lead armies and join their male kin in battle, but unlike the former, Cecilia does not have maiden-king status. When it comes to royal women's involvement in warfare whether at the planning stage or through direct participation in combat, the distinctions between the female private and male public sphere are blurred. Royal women may in some circumstances be justified in assuming the role of protecting their kingdom, or aiding or avenging their male kin by taking up weapons, but the social evaluation of this depends on the outcome for the saga's protagonist.³⁷

Warlike women, especially Þornbjörg and the shieldmaiden Hervor,

have received considerable attention for their military activity, and characters such as Cecilia in *Mágus saga* could be added to this catalogue.³⁸ Judith Butler's theories of performativity and the constructedness (rather than naturalness) of gender suggest ways of reading these figures. For Butler, gender is a process rather than a fixed entity, "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."³⁹ Society then understands these "congealed" acts as natural or given, and they in turn shape and produce individuals' subjectivity. However, because gender is a construct, and certain gender identities have a vested interest in presenting themselves as a part of the natural order, it is open to subversion and parody; by consciously enacting or imitating "gender," a discrepancy between the body of the "performer" and the gender identity being imitated may appear, revealing its constructed nature.

Butler's theory of performativity is pertinent to the *meykonungar* and shield-maidens, especially in relation to Þornbjörg, the most striking representation of a maiden-king. She fully adopts a masculine role: "passing" or masquerading as a man, she demands and receives one-third of her father's kingdom, practices masculine *íþróttir* such as jousting and fencing, maintains a retinue, and rejects her feminine role in both name and deed. She is not satisfied with the traditional gender role open to her, marrying a promising young man of good fortune and lineage and becoming his queen (with the derivative and advisory power that this entails), and she prefers to gain and maintain official power as a prince would. The maiden-king calls "himself" by the masculine name Þórbergr, and in this part of the saga, the character is constantly referred to in the masculine, for example, *hann* and *konungr*. When Hrólfr arrives to propose, the scene becomes both comic and theatrical: he enters the hall under the silent scrutiny of all present and addresses Þórbergr with all the appropriate formal etiquette as *herra* "lord." Þórbergr first ignores the proposal and pretends that Hrólfr is a fool, offering him hospitality, but when he persists, his impertinence in calling attention to her sex provokes the maiden-king's wrath. Hrólfr is violently driven away, and it is not until he has returned and defeated the maiden-king in a second battle that s/he returns to her father and abandons her assumed masculine identity. Only after this do the pronouns revert to the feminine, and from the praise Þornbjörg receives for her intellectual properties and behavior after turning to female activities such as embroidery, it can be inferred that, for the narrator, she had previously been acting unwisely, and thus her masculine masquerade and behavior is indirectly (and retrospectively) stigmatized.

Applying the concept of performativity, the matter of these women

entering a powerful male role seems more than a question of fooling people into thinking they are men, for surely, in Þornbjörg's case, everyone in the imagined world of the saga, including the court and the suitor, knows that she used to be an ordinary, female princess; rather, Þórbergr's and Hervarðr's retinues accept that their leaders, as biological women, can break out of the confinements of their traditional female role and "become" men for all intents and purposes, to perform a masculine role, regardless of what they once were. Whether physique plays a part in enabling this process is unclear as these characters are never described; a more important factor seems to be their mental qualities, the sheer determination to successfully to live as males.

However, this behavior must eventually come to an end, and Þornbjörg and Hervor both eventually turn to female pursuits. The ease with which Þornbjörg moves between masculine and feminine roles is remarkable; she is equally successful as queen, producing heirs for Hrólfr and giving him beneficial advice (as discussed in [chapter 1](#)), but before long she finds herself back in a martial role in order to rescue her husband who is in Ireland, supporting his ally Ásmundr on a dangerous bridal quest. Þornbjörg can equally be said to perform as a woman during the interim period of female performance, so fulsome is the narrator's praise of her appropriately feminine behavior: "var hún hverri mey fegri ok fríðari ok kurteisari, svá at engi fannst jafnfríð í norðrálfu heimsins. Hún var vitr ok vinsæl, málsnjöll ok spakráðug ok ríkynd" [she was more beautiful and courteous than any other maiden, so that no one as fair was to be found in the world's northern continent. She was wise and loved by all, eloquent and wise of counsel and firm].⁴⁰ This passage suggests that after her marriage, Þornbjörg by no means becomes subservient or oppressed, and it is impossible to imagine her ever becoming meek and passive. As a case in point, she is quite forceful with her husband when she advises him to help his ally on his quest; perhaps she is concerned with upholding not only Hrólfr's honor, but by extension her own and the kingdom's. Þornbjörg's performance of femininity and her effortless travel back and forth between the gender roles again reveals their artificiality and unnaturalness, creating a gap between the self and the image.⁴¹ *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* reveals an uneasy and ambiguous attitude to the maiden-king: Þornbjörg's undeniable success in male roles such as fighting and ruling opens up an imaginary space in which gender as a fixed category is undermined; subjects with either male or female bodies can perform the same gender, and the same person can successfully embody different genders during her lifespan. Thus the hegemonic social order, based on binary gender roles and women's exclusion from power justified by essentialist notions of the sexes, is

destabilized and its “naturalness” shown to be artificial, opening up the possibility that these roles were, in the medieval period, perceived (by some) as arbitrarily constructed. However, the narrators’ praise of her womanly behavior after marriage, and blaming the male behavior on her arrogance and tyranny, makes clear which of Þornbjörg’s roles is to be emulated by women. In this context, it is intriguing to speculate whether the sagas might have taken on yet another, and perhaps more immediate, meaning for Icelandic audiences when a woman, Margaret Valdemarsdatter, reigned as queen consort and was the de facto ruler in Scandinavia from 1375 to 1412, but it could equally reflect a situation where heiresses induced a social anxiety.

Female Power and Punishment

The maiden-king narratives pose a challenge to twenty-first century readers informed by feminism and the changes in women’s formal rights and social position achieved particularly in the last several decades. The maiden-kings are by modern standards empowered, but their rule, often legitimate within the saga world, is nevertheless depicted as deviant, and they always marry in the end, losing the autonomy and legitimate power they have before. The most explicit expression of this message is in the epilogue of *Clári saga*, summing up for the audience how the maiden-king text ought to be read: Séréna’s punishment for her haughtiness and humiliation of Clárus, and her subsequent submission, is, the narrator opines, “ljós döemi, hversu qðrum góðum konum byrjar at halda dygð við sína eiginböendr eða unnasta” [a clear example of how other good women should be faithful to their husbands or fiancés].⁴² Critics have suggested either that the maiden-king sagas justify the subjugation of women by men, fueled by Christian misogyny and/or social conservatism, or argue that they are more about the hero’s education from an adolescent to an adult who has embraced courtly values including sexual restraint toward noble women, thus proving himself worthy of his bride.⁴³

The maiden-king romances generally conform to an ideology in which it is natural that the maiden-king relinquish her autonomy, marry, and become subservient to her husband, at which point her kingdom passes to him or is jointly ruled by the royal couple. At her marriage, the maiden-king loses her official authority, property, and independent financial resources. The sagas offer no alternative to the maiden-king’s subjugation, although *Nitida saga* alone leaves the audience with the sense that the man and the woman will have equal standing in marriage. Although Kalinke is right that in no other text is the maiden-king physically abused with as much brutality as in *Clári saga*, the maiden-king’s rape and other degrading and violent treatment in many texts is arguably shocking and disturbing enough to

suggest a misogynistic view toward women.⁴⁴

The maiden-kings' degradation is a punishment for their earlier treatment of the protagonist (or his companions); her abuse of the suitor can take strikingly violent forms, and the men are often disgraced and emasculated to the point where the narrative becomes sadistic. The violence even takes life-threatening forms: in *Dínus saga dramláta*, Philotemia lures Dínus and his retinue into her bower with the promise of sexual favors, where they are instead attacked by her knights. After a grueling battle, Dínus and his men find themselves lying naked, grievously wounded, and half-paralysed in the forest.⁴⁵ An equally extreme case occurs in *Sigurðar saga þøgla*: two suitors are subjected to whipping, shaving, and tarring, the shape of an owl is cut into their back with a sword, and hot coals are dropped onto their stomachs, leaving terrible burns and scars.⁴⁶ Even the relatively benign Nitida has the (presumably pagan) brothers and suitors Heidarlogi and Velogi tortured: sulphur and pitch is poured over the latter, then missiles are hurled at him that kill him, while the former is tricked into falling into the castle's moat and is stoned to death.⁴⁷

These mutilations are, in all their excessive brutality, unusually detailed. In the late medieval period, the Icelandic aristocracy adopted a courtly ideology, with its different models of masculinity and femininity, in order to distinguish themselves from the common people. Bagerius, in his pioneering work on the maiden-king narratives, opens up questions about social status and related anxieties, in connection with the suitor's mistreatment, linking physical abuse such as the removing of hair—a signifier of royalty—and imprinting marks of stigma such as burns onto the body, to markers of low rank.⁴⁸ Physical inferiority—a mutilated body—signals social inferiority, and bears connotations of slavery; thus the maiden-king targets the suitor's body in order to humiliate him and assert her dominance over him. Eichhorn-Mulligan has illuminated how the body truthfully “speaks,” too, in medieval Nordic literary and legal texts, expressing the individual's inner qualities; analyzing *Rígsþula*'s detailed representation of bodies of low social rank in particular, she argues that slaves and people of low social status were marked by physical inferiority.⁴⁹ Law codes prescribe physical mutilation as punishment for thieving, and other sources imply that slaves' heads were sometimes shaved; all these physical marks openly distinguish the individuals as socially inferior.⁵⁰ In contrast to the *fornaldarsögur*, however, the violence in the maiden-king texts is not enacted on a body that is Other, but on the protagonist or his companions. I argued in [chapter 3](#) that monstrous bodies signify human vulnerability abjected onto the Other.⁵¹ In the *riddarasögur*, there is no such distancing; these acts suggest a morbid fascination with the pain that

can be inflicted on the human body, but also anxiety about this same violence and degradation performed not on the Other, but on a version of the privileged subject's Self, albeit in a safe and clearly enclosed narrative space.

The suitor's shame and his fear of his mistreatment becoming public knowledge underscores the symbolic power of the maiden-king's acts. Similarly scathing are her speeches, undermining the suitor's honor: in *Sigrarðs saga frækna* the element of public shame is made abundantly clear, "Sigrarðr . . . er bæði riðr og reidr af þeim svivirdingarordum sem meikongrenn hafði valed honum ä allra manna fære." [Sigrarðr is both blushing and angry because of the shameful words the maiden-king had spoken to him in public.]⁵² In *Clári saga*, Clárus forbids his men from telling anyone of his humiliation and rejection on pain of death, whereas in *Dínus saga dramláta*, news of this gets out and hordes of people gather to mock Dínus: "þar fer nu Dijnus hinn dramläti, sneijptur, suijvirtur og hudstrijktur sem hinn veste þiöffur. huar er nu mikeläti þitt og dramb, nu er þui meirj hädung yfer þig kominn, sem þu þöttist huoriumm meiri?" [There goes Dínus the haughty, disgraced, shamed and whipped just like the worst sort of thief. Where is your pomp and arrogance now that you have been greatly shamed, when earlier, you considered yourself above everyone else?]⁵³ Philotemia's subsequent humiliation in revenge for this disgrace is equally public, played out in a bizarre scene in which the princess, her maidens, and ultimately the entire court dance in a naked and trancelike state around an enchanted, gold-adorned picture that Dínus had placed in Philotemia's bower. When Philotemia finally gathers her senses, she is stricken with grief, embarrassment, and anger.⁵⁴ The lashes Dínus receives seem to be considered a normal and fitting punishment for thieves, and the spectacle of this arrogant and self-important prince's disgrace is a source of pleasure for the crowd, who enjoy seeing him brought down to the level of a common criminal. Although they are brought about by the haughty maiden-king's schemes, Dínus's misfortunes are no more than his just ethical deserts, in the eyes of both public opinion and the narrator, and he takes to his heels in shame. Dínus's retaliation, the disgrace Philotemia suffers from her naked and public dance, seems to be comparable with the implications of thievery and low status, and she vows to avenge this affront by torturing and killing Dínus.

The maiden-king has the power to dominate the suitor, capturing him and inflicting on him serious pain and lasting physical signs of stigma. These markers of distinction quickly lead to public ridicule and embarrassment; the ostensible locus of these anxieties lies in social status and the fear of it being undermined or lost. However, the pain caused by the maiden-king, expressed in elaborate fantasies of

bodily harm, adds a psychological dimension; it conveys both sadistic pleasure and simultaneously a fear of these acts as potentially inflicted on the Self. These scenes of women dominating and abusing aristocratic men—here in a wooing situation—where they have risked appearing vulnerable to the women and the community, and even exposed themselves emotionally, seem to induce anxieties concerning corresponding situations in reality, the implications of a new kind of emotional openness, modeled on courtly literature.⁵⁵ In post-Commonwealth Iceland, especially as the fourteenth century wore on, entry into the aristocratic upper class was becoming increasingly limited, and marriage was almost entirely within the class, more so than before.⁵⁶ For young men aspiring to marry upward these texts could have resonated strongly, expressing their fear of proposing to a woman only to be deemed inferior to her, but also indicating a change in emotional sensibility.

Kalinke considers *Clári saga* and its representation of women's Achilles' heel, greed for treasures and beautiful things, the primary model for the sequence of events in which the maiden-king is degraded in return.⁵⁷ However, aspects of the pattern are universal and find analogues in other Old Norse texts of different genres. In her analysis of the eddic poem *Skírnismál*, which, much like the maiden-king narratives, features a woman who does not want to marry, Larrington employs a feminist theoretical framework to examine what underlies Skírnir's threats to the misogynous Gerðr in order to bully her into submission.⁵⁸ These all involve some form of humiliation, objectification, marginalization, and loss of sexual self-control, "a familiar range of strategies for keeping women in their place."⁵⁹ The forms that these humiliations take indicate for Larrington the opposite of what woman wants and thus express in an indirect way what she truly desires: "intimacy with a lover, social standing, autonomy, and choice."⁶⁰ An interesting comparison to Skírnir's threats to Gerðr is found in the wicked stepmother's curse on the maiden-king in *Sigrarðs saga frækna*, encapsulated in the following spell:

legg eg ä þig at þú skaltt aungvum trú vera, og hvorn þinn biðil forräða, alldrej er þier so vel til hans at þú skaltt ei æ sitja um hans líf enn þú skaltt vera so eigingiorn, at þú skaltt allt vilja eiga þat sem þú sier, enn allt skalttu þat illu launa.⁶¹

[I curse you that you shall never be faithful to anyone, and betray every one of your suitors; never should you like him enough not to try to do away with him, and you shall be so greedy that you will want to acquire everything you see, but you shall repay everything with evil.]

The curse seems to entail social failings: being unfaithful to people with whom one has social bonds, humiliating suitors undeservingly, and greedily coveting things but paying for them with scorn and unpleasantness. The curse burdens Ingigerðr by making her haughty

and overbearing, and unwillingly hostile toward Sigrgarðr, whom she rejects without further ado.⁶² The contents of the curse are recurrent features of the maiden-king's punishment in the maiden-king texts, and if turned on their head, can similarly reveal some of "what woman wants," echoing those values in *Skírnismál* uncovered by Larrington: autonomy, social status, financial independence, and a trusting and rewarding relationship with a husband.

As outlined here, one of the issues at stake in the suitor's humiliation is the loss of social status, and this is equally the case for the maiden-kings, who are not only threatened with, but actually often subjected to, the mistreatment evoked to subjugate Gerðr. Séréna in *Clári saga* suffers such a fall from grace. After falling asleep in the magnificent tent she so covets, the princess wakes up in a sheep-pen, clothed not in her finery, a social marker of distinction, but in a *skarpr skinnstakkr*, a leather tunic reminiscent of the ones worn by giantesses in the *fornaldarsögur*, exposing her to scorn and ridicule, and potentially sexual abuse.⁶³ Much like Gerðr, whose only alternative to Freyr is a giant, Séréna is also forced to live with and serve a cruel and disgusting ogre whom she believes is her husband Clárus transformed:

Til hœgri handar í sæginni sér hon liggja einn dólgr eigi lítinn ok heldr úsýnligan; hann var svartr sem hrafn, nef hans var langt ok bjúgt; at öllu var hann afskapligr. Hann horfir upp í lopt ok hrýtr sem einn dverghundur. Ein úfögr lista hekk af hans nqsum ok niðr í munninn; dró hana ýmist út eða inn fyrir andardrættinum.⁶⁴

[On the right side of the bed, she saw a little fiend lying there, not small and rather unseemly; he was black as a raven, his nose was long and hooked; he was monstrous in every way. He lay on his back and snored like a tailless dog. A rather unseemly blob of snot hung from his nostrils and down to the mouth; it went in and out with his breathing.]

This grotesque character, who has characteristics of *fornaldarsögur* giants as well as slaves from *Rígsþula*, such as dark skin and a hooked, snotty nose, is Clárus's teacher and advisor, Meistari Perus, in disguise. He heaps abuse on Séréna, calling her *vánd púta* "wicked whore" and *fúl ambátt* "foul slave woman," mocks her, starves her, and sets her difficult tasks.⁶⁵ He feeds Séréna scraps and bones, sells her fine clothes, and makes her wear rags, improperly exposing her body, and frequently hits her.⁶⁶ All this she endures without complaint, eventually growing so weak that she has difficulty moving and is reduced to crawling on the floor. However, although they cohabit, Perus does not have sex with Séréna. After a year, Séréna one day finds herself lying on the floor of a church, starving and cold, when Clárus passes her with his entourage. Instead of treating her with Christian mercy, he chooses to add insult to injury: "gefr henni svá þungan pústr undir eyrat, svá at hon tekr annan meira af múrinum hjá sér, svá at nálíga er hon í svima" [he gives her such a heavy blow

under the ear that she receives another from the wall by her side, and so that she is nearly unconscious].⁶⁷ After this final incident, Clárus summons Séréna to his court, formally forgives her for her trespasses, and accepts her as his wife, praising her highly for her patience and loyalty in enduring Perus's abuse.

In this second part of the saga, which Shaun Hughes has argued is based on the Griselda tale type, Séréna is utterly disenfranchized, contrasting with her previous powerful station.⁶⁸ The abuse as punishment for humiliating Clárus and refusing to marry him is twofold. First, loss of rank: Séréna is relegated from royalty to a female slave, the lowest position in society, despised and abused, until she has been taught the lesson of subservience to men expressed in the epilog. Second, as her trials harden, Séréna becomes progressively weaker and more passive, speaking not only to her physical hardship but also to her broken spirit and emotional degradation. The physical punishment, and especially the forceful blow on the head, is unique in the maiden-king romances in its excessive violence. Only the Old Norse female saints' lives, which presumably had a similar audience, although read in a church setting, rival *Clári saga* in their brutal violence toward women, but there, the woman endures violence at the hands of pagans—not legitimate suitors—and is eventually martyred.⁶⁹ Séréna's malnourished and abused body marks her as inferior and disenfranchized; symbolically, when she is taken back into society, she is immediately presented with fine clothing fitting of her regained rank.

A saga that actually does subject its female protagonist to forced extramarital sex with grotesque or socially inferior figures is *Sigurðar saga þögla*. The maiden-king Sedentiana is lured away from her castle by magic, a move that in fact fills her with *astarbrune* "fervent love," which seems more like uncontained nymphomaniac passion (parallel to the *ópoli* evoked in *Skírnismál*).⁷⁰ During three consecutive nights, Sedentiana has sexual encounters with a swineherd, a dwarf, and an ogre, all Sigurðr in disguise. During her first sexual experience, the swineherd: "tok hann hana með afle og undradizt hun þat miog huersu hans lijcame uar glediligr uidkuomu og suo huersu sterkliga at hun uar nu hondlud" [he took her with force, and she was very surprised at how pleasing his body was to the touch, and how strongly she was handled].⁷¹ This episode is remarkable in that the audience is led to believe that Sedentiana discovers, to her surprise, that although the ugly man she sleeps with rapes her, she finds herself enjoying the encounter. Nine months later, the unmarried Sedentiana gives birth to a baby, but she conceals the child's existence from her people and carries on ruling the country. However, the reader must be wary of accepting the account of Sedentiana's pleasurable experience at face

value; the idea may well have been current in Iceland, as it was in Europe in the medieval period, that women could not conceive without enjoying sexual intercourse.⁷² According to Thomas Laqueur, this idea is ancient, dating back to at least second-century Roman sources, and it effectively dismisses rape and justifies the notion of male sexuality as aggressive on the grounds that if the woman becomes pregnant, she must have experienced sexual pleasure.⁷³ However, it is more likely that this scene conceals underlying female anxieties about rape than an interest in women's sexual pleasure; these genuine fears about the psychological suffering rape entails for women are clearly articulated in *Gibbons saga*: “lætr hun [Florentia] þar nu sinn skiæra meydum med litilli skemtan eigi med gledi e(dr) ynndi helldr med heift og hatri meirr med galli og suuiurdu en nockurri þessa heims gledi.” [Florentia surrendered her pure virginity with little enjoyment, with no joy or pleasure but with grief and hate and moreover with bile and shame rather than any worldly joy].⁷⁴

Thus a pervasive concern in these narratives is women's extramarital sexual activity, whether forced or consensual. In romance, it is a cause of shame, made explicit in the translated *Mottuls saga*, a chastity-test narrative in which a magic cloak reveals that only one woman at court has been faithful to her husband, to the embarrassment of both parties.⁷⁵ Courtly literature introduced the idea that male honor depends on the behavior of women; thus female sexual activity outside the strict confines of marriage is a great source of worry in these sources. In *Clári saga*, Clárus requests that Séréna sleep with him in return for his tent; she agrees on the condition that he marry her, with her father's consent and all formalities, “ok oss skal hér engi opinber blygð í verða” [and there shall be no public disgrace for us].⁷⁶ *Dínus saga* overtly expresses the *meykongr* Philotemia's worries about premarital sex with her suitor Dínus: when he first woos her, she pretends to like him and promises to go to bed with him before their marriage provided that he will not label her as promiscuous: “eff ei villdu þier virða oss það til lauslætis edur liettlætis” [if you will not consider us promiscuous or frivolous].⁷⁷ As the paradigm dictates, the unusually misogynist Dínus is duped and humiliated by Philotemia several times, and when he eventually manages to retaliate, he rapes her and then calls her a whore. After Philotemia's virginity has been spoiled, her father declares that she has lost her value; he calls her “skemmd, sem makligt er” [ruined, quite deservedly].⁷⁸ *Sigrarðs saga frækna* voices concerns about rape from fathers' point of view; there is little sympathy for the victims themselves. The handsome Sigrarðr is a serial womanizer, using his good looks to seduce noble ladies only to abandon them after a few nights, “og þötte ríkuð mǫnnum mikel smán i at þeirra frændkonur

ędur dętur voru svęvirdar, enn þeir urdu sięlfer sobęud at hafa, enn eįnge þordi um at vanda” [and powerful men considered it a great disgrace that their cousins or daughters were shamed, but they were forced to accept it because no one dared protest].⁷⁹ However, a comment in typical saga style referring to public opinion indicates how the community views the behavior of Sigręaręr and his companions in ethical terms: “urdu þeir af því ei vinsęler enn af þessu urdu þeir viđfręger” [from this behavior they did not gain in popularity, but they did in notoriety].⁸⁰ Echoing *Gibbons saga*’s emphasis on women’s suffering, *Męgus saga* also distances the despicable behavior of rapists by demonizing them in the figure of the notoriously evil, pagan, and racially Other king Prįams, who goes about plundering and raping ladies:

sįđan sendir hann þær heim aptr, sumar međ barni, en sumar međ annarri hįđung; allar fęru þær brutt međ harmi nęgum, því at engi vildi á hans vald hafa komit; þikkir ęllum ok nęg svęviręa, þeim sem þeirra forrįđ eiga. Þikkir honum sįn fręęđ sem mest, at þær sýti sem flestar.⁸¹

[Then he sends them back home, some either with child, but some with another shame; they all went away with much sorrow because none wished to come under his power; and their guardians considered it a great disgrace. Prįams considers his success greater, the more women experience grief because of him.]

The *hįđung* “shame” done to the women causes them sorrow, and their guardians are equally horrified, but Prįams believes that the more women that suffer his abuse, the more his renown increases. Just as the maiden-king attacks the suitor physically in order to degrade him, so too he asserts his power over her by violating her body and sexual autonomy.

The idea that an unchaste woman is spoiled forever seems to have been a late medieval idea in Iceland, and therefore it seems primarily a result of the new social order, which resembled a feudal society much more than in the Commonwealth era before 1262. The *Įslędingasęgur* occasionally relate events where women are seduced (*fįflađar*), but as the common practice of concubinage during the Commonwealth era shows, extramarital sex was permissible if it served the political interests of the woman’s male kin and lover.⁸² However, when Iceland joined the Norwegian monarchy, and with the adoption of new inheritance laws based on primogeniture, fathers needed to make certain that their daughters retained their value, and husbands needed to make sure that they were the only men who had sexual and thus reproductive access to their wives’ bodies.⁸³ In this process, female sexual behavior rose to greater concern, hence the chastity doctrine needed to be programmed into women. The damage done to the woman’s honor by rape could only be neutralized by marriage: thus, after being raped and losing her virginity, Philotemia

desperately begs Dínus, whom she had previously scorned, to marry her.⁸⁴ This accords with late medieval laws; the *Jónsbók* law code, implemented in 1281, requires a rapist either to marry his victim or else pay damages to her kinsmen.⁸⁵ This idea is paralleled in Anglo-Norman legal treatises on rape, echoing earlier Anglo-Saxon law codes (although the former are influenced by Roman law).⁸⁶

As Luce Irigaray and Gerda Lerner have argued, in patriarchal societies women are commodities, objects that are traded between men (father and husband); the maiden-king romances also depict a maiden's honor as a precious possession that, if lost (or taken by force), decreased or nullified her value.⁸⁷ This finds further support in post-Commonwealth Icelandic laws concerning rape, focussing on the tort against the father or other male kin, not the woman. Indeed, in *Jónsbók* a man found guilty of raping or abducting a woman must compensate her nearest male relative rather than the woman herself, much as in Anglo-Norman feudal society, in which rapists compensated their victim's lord.⁸⁸ In Foucauldian thought, the body is a cultural construct, and the notion of woman as property renders women's bodies as a site onto which power dealings between men are mapped, one man dominating another by violating his property. Here, the act of rape is not understood as simply an act of physical violence like any other assault, but rather one that ties in with which notions of aggressive male and submissive female sexualities, and of power hierarchies. Removing her sexual autonomy is one of the tools with which the subversive maiden-king can be forced back into her subservient position in patriarchy and the "natural" order restored.⁸⁹ One of the components of ideal male behavior predominantly endorsed in romance was sexual restraint toward noble maidens. The male protagonist's rape of the maiden-king is not a result of him losing control of his sexual urges, but rather a deliberate act of violence on her person with the intended and always successful effect of subjugating the woman who rises above her station and forcing her back into the female role.⁹⁰ A similar idea can be found in the *Íslendingasaga Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*: a servant woman mocks Grettir for the small size of his penis and he responds by raping her.⁹¹ The narrator notes that the woman shouted loudly when she was attacked, "en svá skildu þau, at hún frýði eigi á Gretti um það er lauk" [but after their encounter, she did not taunt Grettir].⁹² This short passage similarly suggests that sexual violence against women was generally regarded as a powerful weapon to keep them in their place.

Among all this focus on women's anguish, physical and mental, over rape, the stigma attached to losing virginity before marriage seems in one saga to be used by a maiden-king for her own ends, to avoid marriage. In *Sigrarðs saga frækna*, Ingigerðr promises to sleep with

Sigrarðr on two consecutive occasions, but after they have entered her bower she drugs him before any lovemaking takes place.⁹³ She had previously ordered Sigrarðr's standard to be flown over her castle, making their relationship public knowledge: "er þá ollum augliöst ad ydvart valld er bædi ä mier og yfer öllu því sem mier til hejrer" [then it will be clear to everyone that you have power both over me and everything belonging to me].⁹⁴ After spending one (drugged) night together, the suitor is downcast and conveys his concern to the maiden-king that he did not give her much pleasure. She puts on a show of disappointment and warns him to be more careful about the amount of alcohol he drinks but, promising to remain quiet about his *skömm* "shame," tells him she will give him another chance provided that he hand over to her his excellent sword and shield by way of compensation.⁹⁵ After a second sex-free night, the furious Ingigerðr abuses her suitor in public for his lack of virility:

[sä] öngva kallmanns nätturu hefur og mier mä alldrej at manni verda, hefi ek hvílt hiä honum tvær nætr, ok mun ek aungvar eiga jafn daufligar eður hvar er nü komen qvennsemen sü sem frä þier er sögd, kemur mier þat i hug at þetta mun vallda övinsældum þinum þeim sem þü hefer af konunum, þö at þær hafi ei þorat upp at qveda.⁹⁶

[This fellow is without a man's nature and will never be of use to me. I have slept with him for two nights in a row, and never before did I have such a dull time. Where has your reputed womanising nature gone? It occurs to me that this is what has caused your unpopularity with women, although they never dared tell of it.]

After this incident, Sigrarðr is forced to hand over his ship to the maiden-king in compensation for having spoiled her reputation, despite the fact that they never had sexual intercourse. He makes one last ill-fated attempt to bed the maiden-king but is foiled by her guards, beaten and wounded, and then driven away in shame.

Skirting the issue of the sinfulness of extramarital, nonreproductive sex, this episode speaks to male anxieties concerning the loss of virility and power: Sigrarðr's apologies and compensation payments imply that his embarrassment lies partly in his failure to perform in bed, and thus assert his domination over the maiden-king. The magic sleeping potion she gives the suitor is a powerful tool that she wields to preserve her independence in the face of his attempt to subjugate her, and it also serves to protect her virginity, perhaps signifying a female anxiety about (the first) sexual experience. But the maiden-king's deliberate public declaration about letting Sigrarðr into her chambers by putting his standard on display is harder to explain, for in another text, *Partalopa saga*, the female protagonist is adamant that her affair with the suitor remain a secret, and the expectation seems to be that women would strive to keep their sexual activity before marriage concealed.⁹⁷ It seems logical to infer that by announcing her tryst with Sigrarðr, the maiden-king is deliberately using him and his

promiscuous reputation for her own ends. Although she remains chaste, she makes herself “spoiled” and unmarriedable in the eyes of society, an effective ploy to remain single. Of course, the ultimate reason for Ingigerðr’s misogamy is her stepmother’s curse, and it is only when Sigrarðr follows the advice of his sworn brothers’ wise mother, and successfully completes a perilous quest set by the maiden-king, that she is released from the spell. Thus the curse, ostensibly a punishment, in combination with Ingigerðr’s own sleep-magic, functions to protect her until the young suitor has, in the tradition of young knights in courtly literature, successfully undergone a set of tests and challenges, abandoned his previous dishonorable behavior, and proved himself worthy of a noble woman.⁹⁸

Proto-Feminism

Despite the maiden-king narratives’ overall patriarchal and conservative program, there are occasional glimpses that could be read against the grain as a comment, perhaps an inadvertent one, on women’s oppression in patriarchy. In *Sigurðar saga þøgla*, one of the more brutal and misogynist texts, the maiden-king Sedentiana secludes herself in a castle to protect herself against unwanted male attention: “hugsar hun ath hun skal sitia j sijnum nyia kastala. og si. hinn suartj skal hana eckj augum lita ath skemta sijnum augum med” [she decides to reside in her new castle, and the black one will thus never be able to look at her, with a view of pleasing his eyes]. This comment suggests the idea that women do not want to become objects of the desirous male gaze that renders them “to be looked at” from the man’s subject position.⁹⁹ Another hint at women’s unwillingness to occupy the position of passive sexual prey is found in *Clári saga*, where, provoked by Clárus’s proposal of marriage, Séréna’s temper suddenly changes from friendly to furious at the banquet she gives in his honor; according to the narrator, the effect of her mood change, following Clári’s *faux pas* at the dinner table, resembles a sudden hailstorm on a summer day—it is as if she has assumed the shape of a wolf, a *vargshamr*.¹⁰⁰ Séréna knows that Clárus intends to propose marriage, but she is not interested in his advances. This daring display of hostility is perceived as threatening to the males but we may wonder if, at this point in the narrative, some women in the audience might not have identified with Séréna and perhaps wished for a figurative *vargshamr* of their own in similar situations of unsolicited and unwanted male attention.

Although these are just two instances (from a substantial corpus) where the possibility of reading the text from a female angle presents itself, an overt proto-feminist message can be found in *Nitida saga*, a text in which, unlike any other maiden-king saga, the mutual violence

and psychological humiliation of the eventual marriage partners is omitted from the narrative. At the beginning of the saga, Nitida, the recently orphaned maiden-king of France, lives in a remarkable idealized world without any male authority figures, perhaps a proto-feminist utopia, where the only male close to her, Hleskiolldur, Nitida's foster-brother, obeys her every command. Hleskiolldur functions as a chaperone and defender of the realm, and he also liaises between suitors and the *meykongr*. However, Hleskiolldur never questions the maiden-king's actions nor chastizes her for deceiving and killing her wooers or acting independently; the dominant order has not been internalized in this saga. The invading suitors, Heidarlogi and Velogi, are the sons of the king of Serkland in Africa, who is described as black, ugly, and skilled in sorcery; this depiction codes them as racially Other, malevolent threats who deserve their fate, like many of the giants, giantesses, and other nonhuman creatures in the *fornaldarsögur*.

The control that Nitida exerts over Hleskiolldur suggests that the pair could be seen as split aspects of the same character where the female aspect takes care of decision making while the male element executes her orders in the male sphere. Unlike Þornbjörg in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, Nitida has no warlike attributes and all actual fighting is reserved for Hleskiolldur. However, she does have the freedom of movement to travel as she pleases, and in the first part of the saga, she sails to a remote island in order to obtain magic stones that are essential to any future success in keeping suitors at bay. Instead of the violence, torture, and mutilation present in many maiden-king texts, most of the conflicts in *Nitida saga* (with the exception of the battle with the Saracen brothers) are played out with the help of magic and supernatural tools, and the narrative tone is characterized by fantasy rather than the hostility toward autonomous women found in many other maiden-king sagas.

Paul Bibire has suggested that *Nitida saga* is a conscious response to *Clári saga*; it uses much of the same plot and similar names: Eskilvarður for the returning suitor in disguise and the corresponding meaning of the names Nitida and Clárus, that is, *nitidus* and *clarus*, both “shining” or “bright” in Latin, but unlike most of the maiden-king texts, it depicts Nitida positively.¹⁰¹ Most critics agree that the text is pro-woman; moreover, Guðbjörg Aðalbergisdóttir suggests that the absence of violence and torture implies a greater Christian influence than in other maiden-king sagas.¹⁰² She also considers the lack of ruthless violence found in the other maiden-king texts to imply that the author wrote for a very broad audience, including women and especially young children, and did not want to offend their sensibilities. This is plausible, but one wonders whether the same

women and children would not also have been present when the other texts were performed since *Nitida saga* seems belong to an established tradition, seemingly responding to its more conservative texts. Further, the (unproven) absence of violence in the saga—for Nitida *does* direct violence at the bodies of her Saracen suitors—does not imply a greater Christian influence, since biblical material, hagiography, and other overtly Christian texts such as exempla are by no means free from violence. In fact, most female saints' lives feature horrific violence against women, including lashing, beating, and mastectomies, albeit committed by pagans onto the body of a future saint.¹⁰³ It is more productive to think of *Nitida saga* as a contribution to an ongoing discourse about marriage and gender roles in medieval Iceland, where the more violent and ruthlessly patriarchal maiden-king sagas, especially *Clári saga* with its overtly didactic epilogue concerning the subordinate role of women, are interrogated.

The dynamics of gender relations in *Nitida saga* are strikingly and radically different from those of the other maiden-king texts: Nitida eventually marries Liforinus of her own free will because she decides that he is truly worthy, not because he forces her into submission. The maiden-king is never subjugated by violence; supernatural, violent, and military strategies of wooing are unsuccessful. It is only when Liforinus employs the courtly approach advised by his aunt that he manages to win the maiden-king's affection and her freely given hand in marriage. First, he shows mercy to Hleskiolldur, whom he finds grievously wounded after a battle. Liforinus takes Hleskiolldur back to his kingdom in India and nurses him himself, returning him to France along with ships and gifts when his strength has been restored.¹⁰⁴ Second, Liforinus asks his wise aunt how to win Nitida; she advises him to assume the name Eskilvarður and return in disguise. The prince stays at Nitida's court that winter, delighting her with his harp-playing and stories. In the spring, Nitida asks Eskilvarður to reveal his true identity (which she knows already from her magic stones), he proposes, and she accepts, stating that marrying him would put an end to turmoil and warring in the kingdom.

Nitida saga suggests that wooers should not proceed with force and the intention to dominate, but win a noble maiden's trust and love through courtly and restrained behavior.¹⁰⁵ The woman should not be bullied or forced into marriage, or humiliated for having the audacity to exercise agency and autonomy. Rather, she should be allowed to give her consent freely to a proposal, and have the opportunity to get to know her bridegroom. In *Nitida saga*, marriage is a partnership where there is mutual respect and equality rather than hierarchy. Perhaps the saga was intended as propaganda as the church promoted individualism at the expense of the family's power: it had been

endorsing female consent in marriage since at least the late 1100s. In reality, however, marriages continued to be arranged by parents long after canon law had been introduced in Iceland, and *Jónsbók*, mentioning nothing about female consent, includes an article stating that parents could disinherit daughters if they married without their permission.¹⁰⁶ The crucial arguments advanced in the saga are not female chauvinism, but rather the importance, first, of women's self-determination and female consent in marriage, and second, ideal male courtly behavior and respect toward women, which finds its parallel in the civilizing role of married women on young warriors (often the nephews of their husband) aspiring to knighthood in European courtly literature.¹⁰⁷ Thus it seems that this saga exemplifies that European courtly literature and ideology came to be fully assimilated into native Icelandic form.

A final point to add to *Nitida saga's* different depiction of the sexes and gender relations is that the text uniquely focuses more on female relationships than heterosexual romantic or sexual ones. The relationship between foster-mother and -daughter, and foster-siblings, and the friendship between Nitida and the sister of her suitor whom she abducts, all convey an interest in women's psychological existence outside marriage, whereas in the other sagas, if the woman is seen interacting with anyone other than suitors, it is usually her father.¹⁰⁸ Equally notable is the advice given by Liforinus's aunt about how to approach women with humility and respect, thus evoking courtly, Christian values; it proves to be pertinent and successful and, along with the depiction of Nitida's friendship with her sister-in-law, suggests the text's interest in female solidarity.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

Most of the maiden-king sagas investigated in this chapter end with the maiden-king's subjugation, except in *Nitida saga*, where she marries of her own accord. Elaine Showalter has argued that what many women readers and authors want is to "imagine a world for women outside of love, a world, however, made impossible by social boundaries"; female fantasy is fundamentally a "fantasy of power."¹¹⁰ This imagined world is essentially a space for women in which they are defined by something other than their male kin or lovers, though, as I understand Showalter, by no means to the exclusion of men. Many women authors writing before twentieth-century developments in the position of Western women, from Christine de Pizan to the Brontë sisters, have articulated a desire for or explored other options for women beyond marriage and motherhood, probably voicing the unspoken desires of many of their sex. Feminist responses to many of these female-authored texts have often been frustrated because

although the narratives critique the patriarchal order, they nevertheless end up reaffirming its values, essentially admitting that these are indeed inescapable. The frustration of these responses shows a contemporary desire for alternatives to the traditional “happy ending” projected onto texts produced in a setting that allowed much less deviation from the norm than today. This only drives home the point these authors were making; the utter lack of alternatives to the traditional female gender role means that either the subversive heroine must be resocialized and married, or be killed off. Christianity offers service to God in holy orders as a “career alternative” to marriage and reproduction for women, but although Iceland was Catholic until the mid-sixteenth century, entering a convent seems to have been an unrealistic option for most women except those few from exceptionally rich and noble backgrounds who could afford to pay the settlement and gain permission.¹¹¹ However, presumably most fathers instead chose to spend their resources on marrying their daughters off with a handsome dowry to the most prestigious bachelor available for their own political gain: with the erosion of the chieftain system, mostly built on homosocial bonds, marriage became the most important way of making political alliances in the late medieval period, and male members of the ruling class could probably not afford to lose their daughters to convents in large numbers.¹¹²

The initial situation of the maiden-king narratives seems to accord well with the female fantasy that Showalter describes: they live their lives independently of men and are entirely uninterested in marriage, frequently because of their haughty belief in their own superiority. This is probably an authorial justification for the underlying social understanding that they are unwilling to relinquish their power, which is inevitable if they do marry. Some of them travel or occasionally operate as shield-maidens, uninhibited by the traditional restraints imposed on women. These are clearly revealed in the thirteenth-century *Íslendingasaga Laxdæla saga*, often cited as a saga particularly interested in women. In this saga, the limited freedom of movement for women and their perceived natural role in the domestic sphere is evidenced in the words of a young boy to his parents, who declares he wants to go and see the world: “leiðisk mér at sitja heima sem konum” [I am bored of sitting at home like women], not to mention Guðrún’s astonishing wish that she should accompany Kjartan to Norway, a demand he flatly refuses to consider.¹¹³ *Laxdæla saga* and other *Íslendingasögur* show how women who use physical violence and weapons to maintain their own agenda, such as avenging dishonor or loss of male kin, fail in this traditional male sphere. Their options to act are only through men via the kind of speech acts discussed in [chapter 1](#), or, as explored in [chapter 2](#), by employing

magic (but that is also in the realm of the Imaginary). In the Íslendingasögur and konungasögur, complete female independence from men (e.g., that depicted in *Nitida saga*) is impossible, although in exceptional circumstances queens and high-born women could exercise some individual power in the public sphere. In texts that depart from social realism into the realm of the fantastic, the idea of female autonomy and independence finds frequent expression, and is even admired (though perhaps grudgingly), indicating the existence of a female Imaginary that coveted the kinds of freedoms that (enfranchised) men take for granted within literary productions.

The maiden-king narratives emerged at a time when the Icelandic aristocracy was forming a new class identity and consolidating its power. Women were crucial in this process of social and political structural change; marriage, an economic and political contract between two families that entailed the transfer of property between families and generations, was the primary way of strengthening the political position of those families.¹¹⁴ Men depended on women's participation in this system and needed them to comply with their prescribed role, to marry and reproduce, and female chastity and virginity at marriage became a matter of great concern. In stories featuring the proud female monarch who insists on remaining unmarried, having her succumb to the suitor rectifies her situation, restoring the world to equilibrium and reinstating traditional means of reproduction and succession. The unmarried woman must also remain strictly chaste if her marriageability is to remain intact; rape myths present in the sources show that women were seen as property, objects that could be violated and spoiled in order to assert power over another male. Although aspects of valkyries and shield-maidens from heroic legend such as misogamy, independence, and self-determination are appropriated, these now function strictly as a warning. There is no scope to imagine a world in which women could move so freely or successfully perform male roles, and these unruly women are evoked for the purpose of being stigmatized. These fearsome attributes also reveal certain male anxieties toward women and marriage, an area clearly fraught with problems about power and domination, but also to women's fears of sexual experience, especially violent ones.

Even though the narratives mostly present a didactic lesson principally aimed, one can imagine, at young women and designed to encourage them to keep to their subservient roles, and not to entertain any notions of transgressing on male preserves, they offer a possible subversive subtext. If read against the grain, as Larrington proposes, these narratives reveal what women desire, which, if achieved, would indeed unsettle the patriarchal, hegemonic social order: subjectivity,

autonomy, self-determination, access to economic resources, freedom of movement, love and respect in marriage, and even power in the public sphere. Following Butler, the narratives prohibit these desires by attempting to construct them as only available to men, restoring normativity when the woman has accepted a subservient role in marriage, but the existence of texts such as *Nitida saga* suggests that there were startlingly vocal challenges to this system. The maiden-kings' physical and psychological abuse of the rejected wooers seems a grotesque embodiment of male fears of powerful women; their subversive deeds threaten the male order and never go unpunished. Ideal images of gender (as well as class, race, and other variables frequently used to make distinctions between dominant and subordinate groups in a power hierarchy) are constructed and upheld in the maiden-king narratives, yet also they provide space for the disturbance of these images: in the maiden-kings' performance of traditional male roles such as ruling or military activity, or even in counterversions of the same plot, as in *Nitida saga*. The maiden-king texts open up and explore a female imaginary space where women are independent from men and are successful at filling public male roles.

CONCLUSION

This book has analyzed female characters in a much wider range of texts than previous studies have attempted. Naturally it was, and is, important to examine the canon and its dominant images, and previous studies have produced compelling analysis that has furthered our understanding of Old Norse–Icelandic images of women, but the intense critical focus on the “classical” *Íslendingasögur* and the female inciter in the past has led to other, arguably more representative, and certainly more varied, female characters having gone unnoticed and unexplored. The wider textual scope of this book, which examines not only canonical works from traditionally more privileged genres but also the rich corpus of the popular but critically sidelined *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*, has sought to add to our knowledge and understanding of Old Norse–Icelandic literature by yielding new insights about the relationship between gender and power across genres. First, it has highlighted the many female characters who diverge from the critical stereotype of the “medieval Icelandic heroine” who is typically strong willed, proud, and uncompromising in matters of honor. Second, it has challenged previous scholarship’s oversimplistic understanding of the literary presentation of women’s power as aggressive and linked to violence, arguing instead that female characters who wield power, whether using verbal strategies or magic, often use their power constructively rather than destructively for peaceful ends, and with the aim of preserving the community and its status quo.

Third, the book has sought to interrogate and complicate the images of women presented by scholars in the past, showing that the female whether, women who perform magic, queens and other aristocratic women, maiden-kings, and giantesses, cannot be grouped together into homogenous types in the generalizing terminology of some previous studies. As I have illustrated, each of these female figures performs a different narrative function (or functions) in different texts, being motivated by various agendas: acting for their own, sometimes self-serving ends, or for those of their male kin, for example. As I have argued, these women are portrayed as being able to maneuver to a considerable degree within the traditional roles assigned to them by the hegemonic social order, often subverting these roles without being stigmatized within the narrative if the saga hero benefits from this. In sum, the study has sought to show that female characters in Old Norse–Icelandic literature tend to resist the overrigid classifications in

previous critical discussion; instead they constitute a diverse catalogue of characters, distinguished by factors including social position, ethnicity, economic means, and sexual behavior. However, many of these women are united by their search for agency and subjectivity, that is, their desire to achieve their individual agendas.

This book has also stressed that at any given time in the medieval period (after the beginning of saga writing), there were more than just two or three female literary images or, rather, stereotypes, available to audiences synchronically. *Heimskringla* not only provides representations of the female whether motivated by her own honor, but also depicts impressive queens who wield legitimate power in the political arena, and princesses who hold their own in international negotiations. Additionally, many *Íslendingasögur* include women who are prophetesses, and who deliver predictions of misfortune, as well as the alluring but dangerous Queen Gunnhildr, who proves a difficult adversary to numerous Icelandic saga heroes. Saga authors were innovative, creating nuanced and multidimensional female characters: divergent versions of the “same” female images (e.g., the whether and the female magician) appear on some level not only as a reference, but also in response to previous images, and are used as a way of engaging with gender roles and ideas about social organization.

Historically, the second half of the thirteenth century in Iceland was a crucial and troubled period, during which time, scholars have argued, the social structure and thus conventions and gender roles underwent considerable changes.¹ Following the collapse of the Icelandic Commonwealth, along with the arrival of the new prestigious romance literature from Europe, radical developments also took place in indigenous literary creation, and new genres grew in popularity. One prominent feature of the *fornaldarsögur* is that many of them depict women as wise peace weavers whose agenda is to prevent warfare, a role that would have a logical appeal to those members of the contemporary Icelandic audience who were weary of the ever-hostile atmosphere of feud, bloodshed, and the loss of kin. On the other hand, giantesses who appear in these same sagas in various manifestations of monstrosity enabled the audience to engage with taboo preoccupations. In a process of abjection, unspeakable fears and socially transgressive desires can be seen as having been projected onto these characters, who can find no way into human society unless they have the good fortune of being an enchanted princess. During this period, the maiden-king motif also gained ground. With increased social stratification and conservatism in the fourteenth century and beyond, this figure becomes a vehicle for a certain part of society to instill in young women, especially those of high birth, the idea that they should conform to and embrace their subservient role. Still, as I

have emphasized in conjunction with my analysis of *Nitida saga*, for example, not all audiences necessarily accepted the conservative social message of the maiden-king narrative at face value. Moreover, although maiden-king sagas became popular, other female roles are not displaced wholesale but remain available to post-Commonwealth authors, who continued to compose *fornaldarsögur*, *riddarasögur*, and *Íslendingasögur*, and to embellish and add episodes to *konungasögur* in manuscripts. Equally, their audiences presumably continued to enjoy engaging with all these discrete types of saga literature.

The literary analysis in this book builds on previous scholarship by feminist critics, which has yielded many productive insights. However, this school of thought tends to oversimplify recurrent images and ignore female characters that do not fit into its paradigms of women as oppressed victims of patriarchy. Using a range of pertinent theoretical perspectives formulated or inspired by critics such as Weber, Butler, Austin, Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, Cohen, Shildrick, and others, I have sought to illuminate aspects of the texts under consideration that have previously gone unnoticed, aspects that contribute to my overall and fundamental reading of women in Old Norse–Icelandic literature as active agents within the texts, functioning to engage with a wide range of themes and issues, not only those related to gender.

Clearly, gender roles were a preoccupation for Icelanders in the medieval period. Gender hierarchies are, as I have argued in the introduction, the basis of social organization, and through the large corpus of literature available in the medieval period, different social groups expressed different conceptions as to how men and women should and should not behave. The texts considered in this book reflect a rich contemporary discourse about contested social values, and various competing ideologies, whether conservative or progressive, patriarchal or egalitarian, peace-loving or feud-driven, pragmatic or uncompromising, and inflexible, not only with regard to women, but to countless other aspects of life. The multifaceted images that the medieval Icelandic sources offer speak to an enormously active debate about the role of women in society, centering on socially sanctioned and stigmatized methods for them to gain power, and also exploring what lay outside normative behavior—those prohibited but alluring, and ultimately human, desires that cannot be suppressed. Thus with a retheorized approach to the concept of power and an inclusive approach to female images, this book has sought to shift the attention to female characters that are neither scapegoated inciters to revenge nor oppressed victims of patriarchy, but are rather portrayed as individuals attempting self-realization within existing power structures. These images reflect a highly sophisticated literary culture

in which the range of possible feminine roles available to their audiences is wider, more complex, and less polarized than has previously been acknowledged, a literary culture in which a female character could be described as in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*: “Var hón hverri mey fegri ok fríðari at öllu ok kurteisari, svá at engi fannz jafnfríð í allri norðrhálfu heimsins, vitr ok vinsæl, rík ok stórráð, stórlynd ok stórgjöful, málsnjöll ok spök, ráðug ok hæg.” [She was more beautiful and fairer than any other maiden, so that none as fair was found in the entire northern part of the world, wise and beloved by many, powerful and ambitious, magnanimous and munificent, eloquent and wise of counsel and gentle.]² Women could thus be imagined as wielding power with social sanction in medieval Icelandic culture.

Introduction

1. The articles collected in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) provide good general introductions to and bibliographies for the various types of Old Norse-Icelandic literature discussed in this book. For a succinct introduction of the social, historical, cultural, and literary background of medieval Iceland, see the introduction to Vésteinn Ólason's *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of the Icelanders*, trans. Andrew Wawn (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1998). First published as *Samræður við söguöld—frásagnarlist Íslendingasagna og fortíðarmynd*.
2. For a recent introduction to Old Norse myth and religion, see Christopher Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North: The Gods of the Norsemen* (London: Continuum, 2011).
3. For a vivid account of the skald-king relationship, see Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 1–4.
4. For a general introduction to kings' sagas, see for example, Ármann Jakobsson, "Royal Biography," in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 388–402.
5. Daniel Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken: Erotik, känslor och berättarkonst i norrön litteratur* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2007), p. 148.
6. For an accessible introduction to the *Íslendingasögur*, see Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*.
7. For a recent overview of the debate about sagas and the oral versus written tradition, see the introduction to Theodore M. Andersson's *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180–1280)* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007). For an extended discussion of orality and literacy, see Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*, Publications of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature 2, trans. Nicholas Jones (Cambridge, MA: The Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature, Harvard University, 2004). First published as *Túlkun Íslendingasagna í ljósi munnlegrar hefðar: Tilgáta um aðferð*, Rit 56 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 2002). For an authoritative examination of blood feud, see for example, William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
8. For example, individual manuscripts of the same saga, for example, the *Separate Saga of St. Óláfr*, contain fantastical elements to a varying, and sometimes relatively high, degree. For discussion about the question of genre and overlapping generic distinctions, see for example, "Interrogating Genre in the *fornaldarsögur*: A Roundtable Discussion," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2 (2006): 275–96; and Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 8–26.
9. Some sagas, for example, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, have been said to depict women in a (Christian or clerical) misogynist manner; although this view can be justified in some instances, as I will show, it is by no means unanimously the case.
10. Vésteinn Ólason, "Family Sagas," in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 111 [101–18].
11. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*, p. 51, n. 16.
12. The two foundational works on the *fornaldarsögur* are Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads*; and Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, trans. Randi C. Eldevik (Odense: Odense University Press, 2002). First published as *La Matière du Nord: sagas légendaires et fiction dans la littérature islandaise en prose du XIII^e siècle* (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1995).
13. See for example, Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*, pp. 114–28.
14. For a comprehensive introduction to Norse Arthurian translations, with authoritative

- articles about philological and literary issues, see Marianne E. Kalinke, ed., *The Arthur of the North. The Arthurian Legend in the Norse and Rus' Realms* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011).
15. Jürg Glauser, "Romance (translated *riddarasögur*)," in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 375 [372–87].
16. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. G. Richardson, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 46–58. For applications of Bourdieu's theories to Old Norse-Icelandic literature, see Torfi H. Tulinius, *Skáldið í skrifinni* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag/Reykjavík Akadémían, 2004), pp. 129–65; Kevin J. Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda: The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), pp. 30–73.
17. Sif Rikharðsdóttir, *Medieval Translations and Cultural Discourse: The Movement of Texts in England, France and Scandinavia* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012).
18. Geraldine Barnes, "Romance in Iceland," in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 269–70 [266–86]; Nicola McDonald, "A Polemical Introduction," in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 1 [1–21].
19. For a similar pattern in scholarship on medieval English romance, see McDonald, "A Polemical Introduction." Two foundational studies of the ideological function of romance are Jürg Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas: studien zur Prosaliteratur im spätmittelalterlichen Island* (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1983); and Henric Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom. Sexualitet, homosocialitet och aristokratisk identitet på det senmedeltida Island* (Gothenburg: Göteborgs universitet, 2009).
20. Jenny M. Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).
21. Carol J. Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum* 68 (1993): 363–87.
22. For reasons of space and subject matter, I will restrict the analysis to secular prose, mostly leaving out religious material and myths.
23. Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 1.
24. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology (Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie)*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 1: 53.
25. Max Weber, *Selections in Translation*, ed. W. G. Runciman, trans. E. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 38.
26. Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1: 53.
27. *Ibid.*, 2: 941–55.
28. *Ibid.*, 1: 212.
29. Gaunt, *Gender and Genre*, p. 10.
30. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), see especially pp. 212–30.
31. Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 113–14.
32. Carol J. Clover, "Hildigunnr's Lament," in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, ed. John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), pp. 141–83. Reprinted in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson with Karen Swenson (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 15–54.
33. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962); John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
34. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
35. Reading "against the grain" is an approach, originally advanced by feminist literary theorists in the 1970s and '80s, which entails deconstructing the fundamental ideology, in this instance a patriarchal social organization, that the narrator or text presents as

- normative; see for example, Judith Fetterley, *The Resistant Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).
36. See for example, Agnetha Loth, "Preface," in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, 5 vols., Editiones Arnarnagagnæna B20 (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1962), 1: vii.
37. See each volume's introduction in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, 3 vols., ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík: Bókautgáfan Forni, 1943–44).

1 Women Speaking

1. Sarah M. Anderson, "Introduction: 'og eru köld kvenna ráð,'" in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson with Karen Swenson (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. xii [xi–xvi].
2. Canonical sagas that prominently depict female inciters include *Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, and *Laxdæla saga*.
3. See the introduction for Max Weber's theoretical definition of power.
4. Else Mundal, "The Position of Women in Old Norse Society and the Basis for Their Power," *NORA—Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 1 (1994): 3–11.
5. For example, Snorri goði in *Laxdæla saga* and Njáll Þorgeirsson in *Brennu-Njáls saga*.
6. In his discussion of feud and whetting, William Ian Miller notes that the "conventional woman of the sagas is strong-willed and uncompromising. She is the self-appointed guardian of the honor of her men."; *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 212. When discussing the historicity of the "medieval Icelandic heroine," Jenny M. Jochens refers to women in the "literary sagas," by which she means the *Íslendingasögur* (although they are not the only literary sagas); this character is, according to Jochens, "strong, willful, [and] domineering"; "The Medieval Icelandic Heroine, Fact or Fiction?" *Viator* 17 (1986): 41 and 35 [35–50].
7. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ÍF XXII, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954), p. 292. A great deal has been written about whetting, but space will only allow me to make reference to several key studies in the following discussion.
8. Richard L. Harris, "'(opt) eru köld kvenna ráð—a Critically Popular Old Icelandic Proverb and Its Uses in the Íslendingasögur and Elsewhere,'" *Concordance of Proverbs and Proverbial Matters in the Old Icelandic Sagas*, n.d., web. Nov. 22, 2009.
9. Rolf Heller, *Die literarische Darstellung der Frau* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1958), pp. 98–122; Jenny M. Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), p. 192; William Ian Miller, "Choosing the Avenger: Some Aspects of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Iceland and England," *Law and History Review* 1 (1983): 181 [159–204].
10. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology (Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie)*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, 2 vols. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), p. 53
11. The verb *eggja* is not limited to female inciting and can equally be used when men urge each other on before an attack, as well as when a woman urges her husband to follow courses of action other than violence; see discussion p. 43.
12. Carol J. Clover, "Hildigunnr's Lament," in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, ed. John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), p. 176 [141–83]; for discussion of the public element of the *hvöt*, see Miller, *Bloodtaking*, pp. 213–14.
13. The same goes for Marsibil's *hvöt* in *Sörla saga sterka*, one of the three *fornaldarsögur* to contain an incitement speech, in addition to *Völsunga saga* and *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*; *Sörla saga sterka*, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 3 vols. (Reykjavík: Bókautgáfan Forni, 1944), 3: 213–14.
14. *Þórðar saga kakala*, in *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn, 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946), 2: 6.
15. Brynhildr threatens her husband Gunnarr with divorce if he does not comply with her wish that Sigurðr be killed, see *Völsunga saga*, p. 57.
16. *Þrymskviða*, st. 16, in *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten denkmälern*, ed. Gustav Neckel, rev. Hans Kuhn, 2 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1962), 1: 109

(hereafter *Edda*).

17. Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. with a supplement by Sir William A. Craigie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 417 (hereafter Cleasby-Vigfusson). Compare the servant-woman's challenge to Hrafnkell in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*: "Lætr griðkonan ganga af kappi" [the servant woman presses on forcefully], *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, in *Austfirðinga sögur*, ÍF XI, ed. Jón Jóhannesson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1950), p. 127 (hereafter *Hrafnkels saga*); see also discussion in chapter 4.
18. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962). Scholars generally seem to agree that whetting is a speech act; see for example, Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, p. 162; Anderson, "Introduction," *Cold Counsel*, p. xii; Jane Tolmie, "Goading, Ritual Discord and the Deflection of Blame," *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 4 (2003): 295 [287–301].
19. John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 9.
20. Elaine Tennant, "Prescriptions and Performatives in Imagined Cultures: Gender Dynamics in Nibelungenlied Adventure," in *Mittelalter: Neue Wege durch einen alten Kontinent*, ed. Jan-Dirk Müller and Horst Wenzel (Stuttgart: Hirzel, 1999), pp. 273–316.
21. See Hamðir and Sörli's critique of their mother Guðrún for her incitement: *Völsunga saga*. *The Saga of the Völsungs*, ed. and trans. Richard G. Finch (London: Nelson, 1965), p. 76; *Hamðismál* (st. 6–10), in *Edda*, p. 269. Space does not allow further discussion of the different representations of Guðrún and her sons in the two texts.
22. *Laxdæla saga*, ÍF V, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934), p. 154.
23. See for example, Heller, *Die literarische Darstellung*; Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, pp. 162–203, and "The Medieval Icelandic Heroine"; Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1991), pp. 189–91; Helga Kress, "Ekki höfu vér kvennaskap: Nokkrar laustengdar athuganir um karlmennsku og kvenhatur í Njálu," in *Jöfútu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni. 20. júlí 1977*, ed. Einar G. Pétursson and Jónas Kristjánsson, 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1977), 1: 293–313; Gunnar Karlsson, "Kenningin um fornt kvenfrelsi," *Saga* 24 (1986): 45–77.
24. See for example, Miller, *Bloodtaking*, p. 212, and "Choosing the Avenger," pp. 179–81; Clover, "Hildigunnr's," pp. 141–83; Mundal, "The Position of Women," pp. 3–11.
25. *Hrafnkels saga*, pp. 126–27.
26. Carolyn Anderson, "No Fixed Point: Gender and Blood Feuds in *Njal's Saga*," *Philological Quarterly* 81 (2002): 421–40.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 424.
28. Abjection is a concept theorized by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
29. Anderson, "No Fixed Point," p. 433.
30. Zoe Borovsky, "Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature," *Journal of American Folklore* 112 (1999): 27 [6–39].
31. *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ÍF VI, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943), p. 62 (hereafter *Gísla saga*).
32. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 91.
33. *Sturlunga saga*, 1: 203.
34. *Fóstbræðra saga* has a complex preservation history in medieval manuscripts; for discussion of this matter and the controversial question of dating of *Fóstbræðra saga*, see Jónas Kristjánsson, *Um Fóstbræðra sögu* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1972).
35. *Fóstbræðra saga*, in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ÍF VI, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943), p. 137.
36. Helga Kress, "Bróklindi Falgeirs: Fóstbræðrasaga og hláturmenning miðalda," *Skírnisir* 161 (1987): 271–86.
37. *Fóstbræðra saga*, pp. 140–41.
38. I argue in chapter 2 that Þórdís spákona in *Vatnsdæla saga* is similarly justified in using magic to achieve her ends in a suit and thus preserve the peace in the community.
39. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 291 (my italics).
40. For discussion, see Anne Heinrichs, "Annat er vart eðli: The Type of the Prepatriarchal Woman in Old Norse Literature," in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, pp.

- 110–40. Although I do not agree with Heinrichs that a prepatriarchal order in which women were independent and autonomous existed, her discussion of the Brynhildr-type heroine in Old Norse literature is useful.
41. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, 3. For another redaction of the saga, see *Zwei Fornaldarsögur (Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar und Ásmundarsaga kappabana) nach Cod. Holm. 7, 4to*, ed. Ferdinand Dettler (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1891). The former text is longer and differs considerably from the latter; space does not allow discussion of their divergences.
42. *Laxdæla saga*, p. 7.
43. *Völsunga saga*, p. 39. Sigdrífa is often believed to be Brynhildr due to the conflation of the two in *Völsunga saga*. Because of the lacuna in the Codex Regius manuscript, preserving the heroic lays of the *Poetic Edda*, however, it is not clear whether Sigdrífa and Brynhildr are assumed to be the same character in the *Poetic Edda*. Both are connected with wisdom.
44. *Hávamál* st. 91, 96, 102, pp. 31–32. Translations are from *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Carolyne Larrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 14–38.
45. Variants include *vel at sér um alla hluti* “well-informed in all things,” *margvís* “wise in many things,” *fróð í flestu* “knowledgeable in most things,” *spök at viti* “intelligent,” *spakráðug* “wise of counsel,” and *vel viti borin* “endowed with wisdom.”
46. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, pp. 58–59.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 84. See the shorter version for an even more positive description of her; *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, in *Zwei Fornaldarsögur*, p. 24.
49. *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, 3: 260 (hereafter *Hjálmþés saga*).
50. Compare the six specific rules of conduct that King Höfundr gives to his son Heiðrekr in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*.
51. *Hávamál*, st. 115, p. 35. References to and translations of *Hugsvinnsmál* are from *Hugsvinnsmál*, ed. Tarrin Wills and Stefanie Würth, in *Poetry on Christian Subjects*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, 7 vols. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 7: 358–449.
52. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, p. 137.
53. *Örvar-Odds saga*, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, 1: 313–18. In this book I shall discuss the longer redaction of the saga; for a shorter, drastically different, version, see *Örvar-Odds saga*, Aldnordische Saga-Bibliothek 2, ed. Richard C. Boer (Halle: Niemeyer, 1892).
54. See for example, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, *Hálfðanar saga Brönufostra*, *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, *Sörla saga sterka*. *Örvar-Odds*’s magic shirt also appears in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*.
55. Carolyne Larrington, *King Arthur’s Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), pp. 19–21.
56. Marianne E. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland*, *Islandica* 46 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 47.
57. This motif appears in folktales about daughters and wives of the hero’s antagonist who nevertheless help him, that is, the “Girl as Helper in the Hero’s Flight” folktale type (AT313c), as well as in classical narratives, for example, the myths of Medea and Ariadne; for tale-type references, see Aarne Antti, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography*, trans. and enlarged by Stith Thompson, 2nd rev. (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1961), p. 104.
58. *Íþrótt* denotes “accomplishment, art, skill, in olden times esp. of athletic exercises, but also of literary skill,” Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 320.
59. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, p. 47. According to Marianne E. Kalinke the apple-tree motif is biblical, originally deriving from the *Song of Songs*, 2.3; *Bridal-Quest Romance*, p. 74, n. 10.
60. The parallels to Hjördis’s situation in *Völsunga saga* are obvious: both women choose experience over youth; see *Völsunga saga*, p. 19; Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*, pp. 28, 63.
61. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, p. 62.
62. *Hálfðanar saga Brönufostra*, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, 3: 324.
63. *Völsunga saga*, pp. 46 and p. 66.
64. *Áns saga bogsveigs*, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, 1: 425.

65. Geoffrey R. Russom, "A Germanic Concept of Nobility in *The Gifts of Men* and *Beowulf*," *Speculum* 53 (1978): 1–15. See also *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, in which the unsavory Vilhjálmr arrogantly enumerates his many *íþróttir*: in addition to strength, he claims to lack neither "skotfimi ok vápnfimi, sund eða tafl ok burtreiðir, vizku ok málsnilld, ok enga missi ek þá, er karlmann má prýða" [skill in archery and dexterity in arms, swimming or chess and jousting, wisdom, and oratory, and I lack none of the qualities which a man should have]; *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, 2: 387.
66. *Orkneyinga saga*, ÍF XXXIV, ed. Finnogi Guðmundsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1965), p. 130.
67. The last of these talents could to some extent be shaped by translated romances. Some women in the *riddarasögur* also possess book-learning, see for example, *Vilmundar saga víðutan*, *Mírmanns saga* and some of the maiden-king texts.
68. *Hjálmþés saga*, pp. 240 and 266; see Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 122–23.
69. Larrington, *King Arthur's*, pp. 14 and 17–18; Kieckhefer, *Magic*, pp. 100–6.
70. Larrington, *King Arthur's*, p. 10.
71. Women who perform magic in Old Norse literature often live on the fringes of society; see chapter 2.
72. *Gríms saga loðkinna*, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, 1: 274–76; *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, 2: 229.
73. *The Two Versions of Sturlaugs saga starfsama: a Decipherment, Edition, and Translation of a Fourteenth Century Icelandic Mythical-Heroic Saga*, ed. Otto J. Zitzelsberger (Düsseldorf: Michael Triltsch, 1969), p. 26 (hereafter *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*). In the chivalric *Mírmanns saga*, Cecilía is a most excellent and renowned doctor and heals Mírmann of his leprosy; see *Mírmanns saga*, Editiones Arnarnagæðar A.17, ed. Desmond Slay (Copenhagen: C. A. Rietzels Forlag, 1997), pp. 60–69.
74. *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, p. 16. See also discussion of Véfrejya in chapter 3.
75. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
76. *Hugsvinnsmál*, p. 400.
77. *Áns saga bogsveigis*, p. 426.
78. *Ibid.*, p. 423.
79. *Hjálmþés saga*, p. 261.
80. *Ibid.*, pp. 261–62.
81. *Hávamál*, st. 45, p. 24; *Poetic Edda*, p. 20.
82. *Völunga saga*, pp. 52–54.
83. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, p. 52.
84. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
85. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
86. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
87. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
88. *Hjálmþés saga*, p. 250.
89. The word *ærr* is also used of women; see *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, st. 34, in *Edda*, p. 157; *Völunga saga*, p. 7.
90. *Hávamál*, st. 42 and 44, p. 24; *Poetic Edda*, p. 20.
91. Carolynne Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense: Gnostic Theme and Style in Old Icelandic and Old English Wisdom Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 32.
92. "Opt finnst þat á, at ek er vel kvángaðr. Jórunn hefir opt varat mik við" [It often shows that I am well married. Jórunn has frequently warned me], *Áns saga bogsveigis*, p. 426.
93. C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals 939-1210* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), pp. 58–64; *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ÍF II, ed. Sigurður Nordal (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), pp. 29–33 (hereafter *Egils saga*). Hárekr and Hrærekr are frequently referred to as the Hildiríðarsynir [the sons of Hildiríðr].
94. *Hávamál*, st. 9, p. 18; *Poetic Edda*, p. 15; *Hugsvinnsmál* st. 74, p. 405.
95. Helga Kress, "Staðlausir stafir: Um slúður sem uppsprettu frásagnar í Íslendingasögum," *Skirnir* 165 (1991): 130–56.
96. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, pp. 139–40.
97. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
98. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, in *Zwei Fornaldarsögur*, p. 15.

99. For further discussion of queens and their power, see chapter 4.
100. Though there are only three female incitement speeches in the *fornaldarsögur*, this apparent shortfall is far outweighed by many instances of useful and beneficial female advice.
101. Theodore M. Andersson, “The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas,” *Speculum* 45 (1970): 592 [575–93].
102. “Í því höfðu þeir af brugðit boði móður sinnar er þeir höfðu grjóti skatt” [They had disregarded their mother’s orders by causing harm with stones], *Völsunga saga*, p. 78. The narrative tradition of the brother’s death is complex, and here I only refer to *Völsunga saga*’s account of it; see also discussion of the brothers’ indictment of Guðrún’s whetting earlier.
103. *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, 1: 131–5, 1: 109–10.
104. *Hávamál* st. 84, *Edda*, p. 30; *Poetic Edda*, p. 25.
105. Andersson argues that many of the *Íslendingasögur* similarly privilege these values in their positive portrayals of men who show diplomacy, caution, and moderation; “The Displacement.”
106. See further chapter 4, and Judith Jesch, “In Praise of Ástríðr Ólafsdóttir,” *Saga-Book XXIV* (1994): 1–18.
107. Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, *Konur og vígamenn: Staða kynjanna á Íslandi á 12. og 13. öld*, *Studia Historica* 12 (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun/Háskólaútgáfan, 1995): 186–97; David Clark, “Manslaughter and Misogyny: Women and Revenge in *Sturlunga saga*,” *Saga-Book* 33 (2009): 25–43.
108. *Sturlunga saga*, 2: 88–103.
109. *Sturlunga saga*, 2: 91. For discussion on this episode, see Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, *Konur og vígamenn*, pp. 74–77.
110. “Váru nú sett fullkomin grið milli þeira . . . af góðvilja ok ráðum Brands ábóta ok Steinunnar húsfreyju ok Álfheiðar, móður Sæmundar, ok margra annarra góðra manna tillögu” [a truce was made between them from the goodwill of Abbot Brandr and mistress Steinunn, Sæmundr’s mother, and on the advice of many other good men], *Sturlunga saga*, 2: 96.
111. *Sturlunga saga*, 1: 33.
112. *Ibid.*, 1:35.
113. *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, in *Borgfirðinga sögur*, ÍF II, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938), p. 186.
114. “Þorfinna eggjaði Þorstein at þiggja af Birni allt þat, er honum var þá betra en áðr . . . ‘betr sómir at þit eigiz gott við’” [Þorfinna whetted Þorsteinn to receive from Björn everything that would make him more comfortable . . . “it is more honorable that you are on good terms with each other”], *Bjarnar saga*, p. 186.
115. *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 47–48. I use Keneva Kunz’s translation of the proverb “fangs er von af frekum úlfi”; *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, trans. Keneva Kunz, ed. Viðar Hreinsson et al., 5 vols. (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), 5: 23.
116. According to Jórunn, Hrútr had formed a secret alliance with Þórðr gellir, whose niece Vigdís had divorced Þórðr goddi, the friend and supporter of Høskuldr; thus there is bad blood between him and Þórðr gellir.
117. *Laxdæla saga*, p. 16. Her intellectual qualities are repeated later in the chapter, p. 18.

2 Women and Magic

1. François-Xavier Dillmann, *Les magiciens dans l’Islande ancienne. Études sur la représentation de la magie islandaise et de ses agents dans les sources littéraires norroise* (Uppsala: Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för svensk folkkultur, 2006), p. 157. Jenny Jochens argues that episodes containing the motif of women employing magic are more prominent and impressive than those involving men; *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp. 123–24; see also Helga Kress, “Óþarfar unnustur áttu: Um samband fjölkynngi, kvennafars og karlmennsku í Íslendingasögum,” in *Galdramenn*, ed. Torfi H. Tulinius (Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun, 2008), p. 22 [21–49].
2. Nur Yalman, “Magic,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 9, ed. David L. Sills (New York: Macmillan & Free Press, 1972), p. 527 [521–28]. In what follows, I

do not reject the idea that belief in the efficacy of magic existed in the Middle Ages; nevertheless, I highlight the literariness of the topos as it is employed in the *Íslendingasögur*.

3. Stephen A. Mitchell, "Magic as Acquired Art and the Ethnographic Value of the Sagas," in *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2003), pp. 132–52. Gunnlaugr is said to be instructed in *kunnátt*, which can mean "knowledge" or "magical knowledge," *Eyrbyggja saga*, ÍF IV, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1935), p. 28.
4. Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, in *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, ÍF I, ed. Jakob Benediktsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1968), p. 17.
5. Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, p. 113, and Chapter 5 in the same volume; Katherine Morris, *Sorceress or Witch? The Image of Gender in Medieval Iceland and Northern Europe* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), pp. 44–48; Helga Kress, *Máttugar meyjar: Íslensk fornþekkingarsaga* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1993), pp. 35–38. See, however, Helga's more recent literary and theoretical reading of women performing magic in Helga Kress, "Óþarfar unnustur áttu."
6. See also Neil S. Price, *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Uppsala: The Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, 2002), p. 209; Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, "Hostile Magic in the Icelandic Sagas," in *The Witch Figure*, ed. Venetia Newall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 20–41.
7. Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVI–XXVIII, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, 3 vols. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941–51), 1: 13, 19.
8. Price, *The Viking Way*, pp. 108–9. Margaret Clunies Ross has drawn a link between allowing spirits to enter one's body and phallic penetration, both being considered feminine "in a society that equates the act of sexual penetration with masculinity and the function of receptivity with femininity"; *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, 2 vols. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994), 1: 209.
9. Price, *The Viking Way*, pp. 66 and 327; Catharina Raudvere, "Trolldómr in Early Medieval Scandinavia," in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Middle Ages* (London: Athlone Press, 2002), pp. 97–101 [75–171].
10. Price, *The Viking Way*, p. 116 and 67.
11. Gisli Pálsson, "The Name of the Witch: Sagas, Sorcery and Social Context," *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*, ed. Ross Samson (Glasgow: Cruithne Press, 1991), pp. 157–68. Magic and supernatural activity of some kind occurs in 32 out of 42 *Íslendingasögur*.
12. See for example, John McKinnell, "Encounters with *Völur*," in *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2003), p. 111 [110–131]; Raudvere, "Trolldómr," pp. 122–23.
13. However, there are quite a few examples of female cursing in eddic poetry and *Völunga saga*.
14. *Grettis saga*, pp. 247–48; trans. Bernard Scudder, *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson et al., 5 vols. (Reykjavík: Alþingi, 1997), 2: 169.
15. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962). For further discussion about speech acts, see chapter 1.
16. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 21. For a similar utterance in terms of its effect (though not its formulation), see *Kormáks saga* (pp. 221–22), where Þórveig takes revenge on Kormákr for killing her sons and driving her off her land by laying the curse on him that he will never have Steingerðr: "því skal ek þér launa, at þú skalt Steingerðar aldri njóta." [I will repay you for this by preventing you from enjoying Steingerðr.]
17. John R. Reinhard, *The Survival of Geis in Mediaeval Romance* (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1933), p. 5; James MacKillop, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 221; Rosemary Power, "Geasa and Álgö: Magic Formulae and Perilous Quests in Gaelic and Norse," *Scottish Studies* 28 (1987): 69–89.
18. A similar example is found in *Örvar-Odds saga*, where the prophecy of the *völva* functions as a narrative framework, and provides a neat conclusion to the story when the prophecy is fulfilled at the end of Oddr's long life.
19. Cf. *farandkonur* "travelling women" bringing news between farms in order to advance the plot of a saga; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 112.

20. “Þótti mikít undir, at húsfreyr fagnaði henni vel um herað; sagði [hon] nokkut villhalt, sem henni var beini veittr” [It was considered important that housewives in the region received her well, for she gave partial reports depending on the hospitality she was offered], *Víga-Glúms saga*, in *Eyfirðinga sögur*, ÍF IX, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1956), p. 41.
21. *Víga-Glúms saga*, p. 41.
22. *Grettis saga*, pp. 223–24.
23. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 320. See also *Eyrbyggja saga* (pp. 171–76), in which the foster-mother of Þóroddr warns him against allowing the calf Glæsir to live; Þóroddr flouts this request with the result that Glæsir kills him.
24. “[Þ]ó gekk það flest eftir” [yet most of it became true], *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 320.
25. *Gísla saga*, pp. 59–60.
26. *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 99–100, pp. 105–6.
27. The case of Queen Gunnhildr in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* is difficult since, rather unusually, she is the saga’s villain and Egill’s main adversary who conspires to get rid of him. Thus the narrator’s attitude is negative toward her, and she is demonized in various ways, not least her association with malevolent magic, but there is no conclusive evidence that she directly performs magic. The saga associates her with *seiðr* but states that she instructed others carry out the ritual: “Svá er sagt, at Gunnhildr lét seið efla ok lét þat seiða at Egill Skalla-Grímsson skyldi aldri ró biða á Íslandi, fyrr en hon sæi hann” [my italics] [It is said that Gunnhildr had a *seiðr* performed and had it conjured that Egill Skalla-Grímsson should never be at peace in Iceland], *Egils saga*, p. 176. On the question of the poisoned ale served to Egill at the feast in Atley, Gunnhildr and the host Bárðr conspire to poison Egill’s drink while it is Egill who performs the actual magic in this scene (p. 109). The saga also hints that the queen shape-shifts into a swallow in order to disrupt Egill when he is composing *Höfuðlausn* (pp. 182–83).
28. *Grettis saga*, p. 254; *The Saga of Grettir*, p. 173.
29. The saga states that Gamli was *félitill maður* “a man of little economic means,” *Fóstbræðra saga*, p. 242.
30. *Fóstbræðra saga*, p. 248. Similarly, Þorgríma galdrakinn in *Eyrbyggja saga* (p. 109) is employed by Þóroddr to dispose of Björn; she uses a weather-spell against him but he survives. Here, the magic functions as an obstacle, which the hero must overcome to prove his worth; this motif also appears in *Vígundar saga* and arguably is borrowed from the *fornaldarsögur*.
31. *Vígundar saga*, p. 82.
32. *Vatnsdæla saga*, ÍF VIII, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939), p. 119.
33. It is actually Þorkell who executes the plan in terms of using the wand to bewitch Guðmundr, but he is unlikely to be taken as the one performing the magic or having magical abilities.
34. *Finnboga saga ramma*, in *Kjalnesinga saga*, ÍF XIV, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1959), p. 311; *Vatnsdæla saga*, pp. 89–92.
35. See Philadelphia Ricketts, *High-Ranking Widows in Medieval Iceland and Yorkshire: Property, Power, Marriage and Identity in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 51–67, and Chapter 4 of the same book.
36. William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 27.
37. Bróka-Auðr in *Laxdæla saga* and Þórdís Súrsdóttir in *Gísla saga* are the classic examples of women failing to kill their victim; a third is Þorbjörg in *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*.
38. *Fóstbræðra saga*, p. 162.
39. This is according to the shorter version of the saga, and the *Íslensk fornrit* edition’s primary text; in the longer version—the ÍF edition’s secondary text—Gísli’s reaction is more moderate; see Emily Lethbridge, *Narrative Variation in the Versions of Gísla saga Súrssonar* (Diss. University of Cambridge, 2007), pp. 124–25. For discussion, see Roberta Frank, “Marriage in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Iceland,” *Viator* 4 (1973): 473–84.
40. *Fóstbræðra saga*, pp. 162–63.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
42. “Svá er víst; eigi er sýnt, nær þessar sneypu verðr hefnt, því at við troll er um at eiga” [It is clear that it is by no means certain that this dishonor will be avenged, for we are

dealing with a witch]; *Fóstbræðra saga*, p. 165.

43. For a discussion of this episode in the context of women's nonviolent methods of conflict resolution, see Giselle Gos, "Women as a Source of *heilræði*, 'sound counsel': Social Mediation and Community Integration in *Fóstbræðra saga*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108 (2009): 281–300.
44. Unusually, Þórdís has the help of some sort of spirits to find Þormóður, which can be deduced from her statement: "Víða hefi ek gøndum rennt í nótt, ok em ek nú vís orðin þeira hluta, er eki vissa eigi áðr" [I have sent sprits to many places last night, and now I am aware of those things which I did not know before]; *Fóstbræðra saga*, p. 243. For discussion about *gandir*, see for example, Clive Tolley, "Vörðr and *Gandr*: Helping Spirits in Norse Magic," *Arkiv for nordisk filologi* 110 (1995): 62–75 [57–75].
45. *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, pp. 376–77.
46. *Gísla saga*, p. 59.
47. *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 70. The family's *gipta* "luck" is a motif running through the entire saga.
48. Obviously, incidents such as the execution of practitioners of magic, for example, by stoning, shows the presence of hostility but these punishments are by no means the standard practice.
49. For a discussion about *Fóstbræðra saga*'s attitude toward the ruling class, see for example, Helga Kress, "Bróklindi Falgeirs."
50. The shirt that lends invulnerability (Boberg D1344.9.1) appears in several *Íslendingasögur*; see Inger M. Boberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, *Bibliotheca Arnarnagæana* 27 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1966), p. 70. The motif dates back to at least the twelfth century in Old Norse–Icelandic sources; see *Landnámabók*, in *Íslendingabók*. *Landnámabók*, ÍF I, ed. Jakob Benediktsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1986), p. 106.
51. For further discussion, see chapter 3.

3 Monstrous Women

1. For discussion about giants, both male and female, in Old Norse myth, especially negative reciprocity between giants and gods, see Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, vol. 1 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994).
2. Katja Schulz, *Riesen: Von Wissenschütern und Wildnisbewohnern in Edda und Saga* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2004), pp. 184–203; Lotte Motz, "Giantesses and Their Names," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 15 (1981): 495–511.
3. John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2005), pp. 181–96. Lotte Motz, "The Storm of Troll-Women," *Maal og minne* (1988): 31–41.
4. For discussion about giantesses, see Helga Kress, "Baráttan við tröllskessurnar," *Máttugar meyjar: Íslensk fornþekknings saga* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1993), pp. 119–27; Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, "Nasty, Brutish, and Large: Cultural Difference and Otherness in the Figuration of the Trollwomen of the *Fornaldar sögur*," *Scandinavian Studies* 73 (2003): 105–24; Lorenzo Lozzi Gallo, "The Giantess as Foster-Mother in Old Norse Literature," *Scandinavian Studies* 78 (2006): 1–20.
5. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3–25; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*, *Medieval Cultures* 17 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Hybridity, Identity, and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain: On Difficult Middles* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: Sage, 2002).
6. Cohen, *Of Giants*, p. xii.
7. I follow Torfi H. Tulinius's categorization of *fornaldarsögur* in *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, trans. Randi C. Eldevik (Odense: Odense University Press, 2002), pp. 17–18. The sagas in which giantesses appear are: *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, *Friðþjófs saga ins frækna*, *Hálfðanar saga Brönufostra*, *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, *Sörla saga sterka*, *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, and the three *Hrafnistumannasögur*, *Ketils saga hængs*, *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, and *Örvar-Odds saga*.

- 8.Cohen, "Monster Culture," p. 4.
- 9.Ibid., p. 12.
- 10.Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, pp. 1, 3, 19–20.
- 11.Ibid., p. 2; Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
- 12.Jacques Derrida, "Différance," *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie*, LXII, no. 3 (1968): 73–101.
- 13.Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, pp. 4–5.
- 14.Cohen, *Of Giants*, p. xiii.
- 15.For a full discussion of the etymology and meaning of terms referring to giants, see Schulz, *Riesen*, pp. 29–52; see also the overview of their attributes in Ármann Jakobsson, "Identifying the Ogre: The Legendary Saga Giants," in *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed; Studier i de oldtidslandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson, and Annette Lassen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanums Forlag, 2009), pp. 181–200.
- 16.This episode, set in Risaland (land of the giants), is preserved in the saga's longest recension, preserved in AM 343 4to; *Örvar-Odds saga*, p. 340.
- 17.*Gríms saga loðinkinna*, p. 274. See also *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, 3: 355, and *Clári saga*, where a male ogre is also snotty; *Clári saga*, Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek 12, ed. Gustav Cederschiöld (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1907), p. 53.
- 18.See discussion of the *fier baiser* pp. 71–2. Other giantesses whose unattractiveness is referred to in sarcastic terms are Skinnnefja in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, 3: 161 (hereafter *Egils saga einhenda*); Margerðr in *Hjálmþés saga*, whose teeth and mouth are so ugly that Hjálmpér saw "at hún mundi mega gefa gildan koss" [that she would be able to give a hefty kiss], p. 255; and Gríðr in *Illuga saga*, p. 355.
- 19."En því fólki [risum] er svá háttat, at þat er miklu stærra ok sterkara en nokkur kind önnur; vænni eru þeir ok en flestir menn aðrir ok ekki vitrari" [but those people (giants) are normally much larger and stronger than any other man; they are more handsome than most people but no wiser], *Örvar-Odds saga*, p. 340; Brana is "með mennsku móti" [with human attributes], *Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra*, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, 3: 332.
- 20.*Egils saga einhenda*, pp. 177–78.
- 21.As Jochens notes, women's bodies were more or less covered by their dress in the medieval period; Jochens, "Before the Male Gaze: The Absence of the Female Body in Old Norse," in *The 8th International Saga Conference: The Audience of the Sagas*, 2 vols. (Gothenburg: Gothenburg University, 1991), p. 256 [1: 247–56]. This accords with Judith Jesch's description of female clothing in the Viking Age; Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1991), pp. 14–18.
- 22.*Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, pp. 226–27.
- 23.See for example, Straubhaar, "Nasty," p. 107. This area is now referred to as Sápmi.
- 24.See Margerðr in *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis* (p. 254), Grímhildr in *Örvar-Odds saga* (p. 349), Mána and an unnamed giantess in *Sörla saga sterka* (pp. 198 and 201), Gríðr in *Illuga saga* (p. 355), and Geirríðr Gandvíkrekka in *Gríms saga loðinkinna* (p. 275). Interestingly, the word *klær* is also used about vultures' talons.
- 25.The obvious exceptions are women in traditional male roles—shield-maidens and maiden-kings—and *Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra*'s Ingibjörg, who must, with her brother, escape their father's court in order to survive.
- 26.The sole, anomalous exception is in *Hjálmþés saga* (pp. 259–60), where Hervör is described in terms obviously influenced by Continental romance.
- 27.Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p. 263. A brief survey of the female characters in the *Íslendingasögur* most known for their beauty confirms this statement: Helga in *fagra* "the fair," Hallgerðr, Queen Gunnhildr, and Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir are said to be beautiful, but apart from Hallgerðr's and Helga's glorious hair, no further description is provided. The most detailed passage relating a woman's physical appearance is probably found in the *Fóstbræðra saga* description of Þorbjörg Kolbrún, though she is not considered very attractive; *Fóstbræðra saga*, p. 170.

Few descriptions of women's physical attributes appear in *konungasögur*.

28. Amy Eichhorn-Mulligan, "Contextualising Old Norse-Icelandic Bodies," in *The Fantastic in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: Sagas and the British Isles. Preprint Papers of the 13th International Saga Conference. Durham and York, 6th-12th August, 2006*, ed. John McKinnell, David Ashurst, and Donata Kick (Durham: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), pp. 198–207.
29. Cleasby-Vigfusson translates *neffa* as "nose, beak." The name Arinnefja also appears in *Rígsþula*, where it is one of the names of the slaves' daughters; *Rígsþula* st. 13, in *Edda*, p. 282. For discussion of giantesses' names in Old Norse myth and sagas, see also Motz, "Giantesses and Their Names."
30. Cf. the kenning "vargr hafs eisar" [*the sea-wolf > the ship goes dashing*]; Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 124. The giantess Hyrrokkin in Old Norse mythology rode a wolf with serpents for a bridle; *Gylfaginning*, in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, 2nd edn. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005), p. 46.
31. *Hjálmþés saga*, pp. 247–48. Another female *finngákn*, Grímhildr, appears in *Örvar-Odds saga*, pp. 347–48.
32. Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 76. See further discussion below.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 364.
34. *Gylfaginning*, p. 10.
35. A human Grímhildr appears in *Volsunga saga* and a Geirríðr in *Eyrbyggja saga*.
36. Helga Kress seems to state this applies to all giantesses (see *Máttugar meyjar*, pp. 119–27), but as will become clear, that is not the case.
37. Helga Kress, *Máttugar meyjar*, pp. 119–27.
38. Straubhaar, "Nasty," pp. 105–24.
39. Ruth Mazo Karras notes that although the stereotypical slave in Icelandic literature is small and dark, this was not necessarily the case in reality; thus slaves are constructed as Other in literary sources even though they may have had a similar physical appearance to Icelanders of Scandinavian origin. Proverbs and negative images of slaves further show that a hostile attitude to slaves was pervasive in medieval Iceland; *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 56 and 64.
40. Eichhorn-Mulligan, "Contextualising," pp. 201–2; see also Karras, *Slavery*, pp. 58 and 61–63.
41. Karras, *Slavery*, p. 50; see p. 143 for discussion about the decline of slavery in Iceland.
42. Cohen, "Monster Culture," p. 11.
43. Both Uli Linke and Margaret Clunies Ross argue in their discussions of the Norse creation myth that when Ýmir produces children from his armpit, it symbolizes a displaced vagina; Uli Linke, "The Theft of Blood, the Birth of Men: Cultural Constructions of Gender in Medieval Iceland," in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1992), p. 275 [265–88]; Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 1: 152.
44. See Linke, "The Theft," p. 279.
45. *Ketils saga hængs*, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, 1: 260.
46. *Ketils saga hængs*, p. 261.
47. See for example, *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 53. For discussion of medieval beliefs about the evil eye and ways in which to protect against its power, see Annette Lassen, *Øjet og blindheden i norrøn litteratur og mytologi* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Forlag, 2003), pp. 31–39.
48. *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, p. 276. Women can also punish men's trespasses against them by inflicting an eye ache on them, as Þorbjörg Kolbrún does to Þormóðr in *Fóstbræðra saga*.
49. See Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992).
50. Cohen, "Monster Culture," p. 17.
51. See also the discussion of violence in chapter 5.
52. See for example, *Bósa-saga*, in *Die Bósa-Saga in zwei Fassungen nebst Proben aus den Bósa-Rímur*, ed. Otto Luitpold Jiriczek (Strassburg: Verlag von Karl J. Trübner, 1893), pp. 23–25 and 39–43.
53. Cohen, "Monster Culture," p. 9.

54. *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, p. 19.
55. For a similar account of a giantess growing larger, although in a Danish historiographical source, see Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes: Books I-IX*, ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson, trans. Peter Fisher, 2 vols. (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1979), 1: 22–24.
56. *Hjálmþés saga*, pp. 253–54.
57. See further discussion of the *riddarasögur* in chapter 5.
58. When the *Íslendingasögur* do engage with sexual matters, they are more preoccupied with sexual deviance such as *ergi*, or, rather, with (often slanderous) accusations of such practices. For discussion, see Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. Joan Turville-Petre (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983). First published as *Norrønt nid: forestillingen om den umandige mand i de islandske sagaer* (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1980).
59. *Ketils saga hængs*, p. 252. The use of the adjective *drengilig* “brave, valiant” for a woman and a giantess is unusual and recalls the description of Bergþóra in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, who is famously described as “kvenskörungur mikill ok drengir góðr” [a most outstanding woman and very bold]; see further Jochens, *Images of Women*, pp. 212–13, and Clover, “Regardless of Sex.”
60. *Ketils saga hængs*, p. 256.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
62. Old Norse saga literature (apart from the romances, influenced by a non-native rhetoric) is well known for its terse style and reluctance to portray emotion, so this seems to be an unusual departure from form. For a stigmatized relationship between a Norwegian and a possibly monstrous or demonic woman of northern origin, see Haraldr hárfagri’s “fair-hair’s” relationship with Snæfríðr Svásadóttir in *Heimskringla*, 1: 126–27.
63. *Örvar-Odds saga*, p. 341.
64. *Ketils saga hængs*, p. 257.
65. *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, p. 275.
66. *Hjálmþés saga*, p. 249.
67. Schulz, *Riesen*, p. 188.
68. Schulz, *Riesen*, pp. 196–97.
69. Cohen, “Monster Culture,” pp. 14 and 17.
70. Rory McTurk, *Chaucer and the Norse and Celtic Worlds* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 107.
71. R. S. Loomis, “The Fier Baiser in Mandeville’s Travels, Arthurian Romance, and Irish Saga,” *Studi Medievali* 17 (1951): 110–111 [103–114]; McTurk, *Chaucer*, pp. 127–28.
72. Referred to as the *fier baiser* in French romance, it is frequent in insular ballads.
73. Loomis, “The Fier,” p. 109. See *Gríms saga loðinkinna* and *Hjálmþés saga*.
74. McTurk, *Chaucer*, pp. 139–47.
75. See McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, p. 195.
76. Cf. the wicked stepmother’s function in Arthurian legend; see Larrington, *King Arthur’s Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), p. 86.
77. Cohen, “Monster,” pp. 12–14.
78. In *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, Egill’s great-grandmother is Hallbera, the sister of Hallbjörn hálftröll, the father of Ketill hængs; all of them are descended from the famous Úlfr inn óargi. The Sturlungar clan almost certainly considered Egill an illustrious ancestor; thus, this is a clear example of a thirteenth-century investment in enhancing the prestige of lineage. See also Stephen A. Mitchell’s discussion of Haukr Erlendsson and his ancestry in connection with the (early fourteenth century) Hauksbók manuscript; *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 123–26.
79. Cohen, “Monster Culture,” p. 20.
80. See discussion about marriage in medieval Iceland in chapter 5.
81. This is a term borrowed from McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, p. 181.
82. Cohen, “Monster Culture,” p. 6.
83. See for example, Helga Kress, “Fyrir dyrum fóstru: Textafræðingar og konan í textanum út frá vísu Helgu Bárðardóttur í *Bárðar sögu Snæfellsáss*,” in *Fyrir dyrum fóstru: Greinar um konur og kynferði í íslenskum fornþóknemntum* (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands/Rannsóknastofa í kvænnafræðum, 1996), pp. 89–97 [67–100].
84. Gunnar Karlsson, “Barnfóstrur á Íslandi að fornu,” in *Miðaldabörn*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson and Torfi H. Tulinius (Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2005), pp. 43–50.

85. Ármann Jakobsson, “Ástin á tímum þjóðveldisins,” in *Miðaldabörn*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson and Torfi H. Tulinius (Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2005), p. 78 [65–85].
86. Motz, “The Storm of Troll-Women.”
87. *Bárðar saga*, in *Harðar saga*, ÍF XIII, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1991), p. 142.
88. See also McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, pp. 182–85.
89. The title is postmedieval; the saga’s oldest manuscript dates from ca. 1600. There is some doubt as to whether the saga is originally medieval or based on ballads, but the same story material is used by the Danish historiographer Saxo Grammaticus around 1200, suggesting that it was available in some form in the medieval period; see Judith Jesch, “Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra,” in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano et al. (New York: Garland, 1992), pp. 322–23.
90. Grímhildr’s punishment is addressed earlier in this chapter. Interestingly, Grímhildr is also the name of the wicked giantess-stepmother in *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, as well as the mother of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir in *Volsunga saga*.
91. *Örvar-Odds saga*, p. 340.
92. *Hálfðanar saga Brúnufóstra*, p. 332.
93. Another occurrence in medieval sources of a giant abducting a human woman with the intention of rape is related in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, see *The History of the Kings of Britain: An Edition and Translation of De gestis Britonum* [Historia Regum Britanniae], ed. Michael D. Reeve, trans. Neil Wright (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), p. 225.
94. *Hálfðanar saga Brúnufóstra*, p. 336.
95. *Brönnugras* (orchid) purportedly derives its name from the saga; see Ágúst H. Bjarnason, *Íslensk flóra með litmyndum* (Reykjavík: Forlagið, 1994), p. 194. Belief in the orchid’s aphrodisiac qualities is recorded as early as ca. 300 BC in Theophrastus’s botanical work *Inquiry into Plants*; see John Scarborough, “The Pharmacology of Sacred Plants, Herbs, and Roots,” in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, ed. Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 148–49 [138–74].
96. Aarne Antti, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography*, trans. and enlarged by Stith Thompson. 2nd rev. edn. (Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia, 1973), p. 104.
97. Cohen, *Of Giants*, p. xiii.

4 Royal and Aristocratic Women

1. Lars Lönnroth, “Ideology and Structure in Heimskringla,” *Parergon* 15 (1976): 17 [16–29]. Although many scholars believe Snorri Sturluson to be the author of *Heimskringla*, in my own analysis, the identity of the author (or authors) is not pivotal to my argument.
2. With the exception of source-critical and philological studies; see Sigurður Nordal, *Om Olaf den Helliges Saga: En kritisk undersøgelse* (Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gads Forlag, 1914); Oscar A. Johnsen, *Friðgerðar-saga: en kildekritisk undersøkelse* (Oslo: Grøndahl, 1916); Otto von Friesen, “Fredsörnhandlingarna mellan Olov Skötkonung och Olav Haraldsson,” *Historisk tidskrift* (svensk) 62 (1942): 205–70; Hans Schottman, “Friðgerðarsaga,” in *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. Heiko Uecker (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994), pp. 539–53; Theodore M. Andersson, “The Oral Sources of *Ólafs saga helga* in *Heimskringla*,” *Saga-Book* 32 (2008): 5–38. Only Anne Heinrichs has acknowledged that the princesses Ingigerðr and Ástriðr both play an important role; see “Christliche Überformung traditioneller Erzählstoffe in der ‘Legendarischen Olafssaga,’” in *Sixth International Saga Conference 28.7–2.8 1985: Workshop Papers* (Copenhagen: Det Arnamagnæanske Institut, 1985), p. 455 [451–67]; and “Wenn ein König liebeskrank wird,” in *Die Aktualität der Saga. Festschrift für Hans Schottmann*, ed. Stig Toftgaard Andersen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), pp. 36–43.
3. *Ólafs saga hins helga: die “Legendarische Saga” über Olaf den Heiligen (MS Delagard. saml. nr. 811)*, ed. and trans. Anne Heinrichs et al. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1982), pp. 102–4 (hereafter *Legendary Saga*); Snorri Sturluson, *Den store saga om Olav den hellige: Efter pergamenthåndskrift i Kungliga biblioteket i Stockholm nr. 2 4to med varianter fra andre håndskrifter*, vol. 2, ed. Oscar Albert Johnsen and Jón Helgason (Oslo: Kjeldeskriftfondet, 1941), pp. 769–71 (hereafter *Den store saga om Olav den hellige*).

4. Jenny M. Jochens, "The Politics of Reproduction: Medieval Norwegian Kingship," *American Historical Review* 92 (1987), 327–49.
5. Jochens, "The Politics," p. 347. Hákon also married off his daughter Kristín in Spain, probably to reduce the likelihood of her offspring making claims to the throne.
6. Carolynne Larrington, "Queens and Bodies: The Norwegian Translated *lais* and Hákon IV's Kinswomen," *JEGP* 108 no. 4 (2009): 511–16 [506–27].
7. Judith Jesch, "In Praise of Ástriðr Óláfsdóttir," *Saga-Book XXIV* (1994): 1–18.
8. Jesch, "In Praise," p. 14.
9. This episode is related in different versions in *Ágrip*, the *Legendary Saga*, *Heimskringla* and the *Separate Saga of St. Óláfr*, probably written before *Heimskringla*. The saga of St Óláfr preserved in *Heimskringla* is largely the same as the *Separate Saga*, but as I will discuss later, some of the latter's late medieval manuscripts manifest an extremely interesting tradition with regards to female characters.
10. Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), see especially Chapter 2.
11. *Realpolitik* is a term used by Max Weber to describe politics deprived of ideals and reduced to focusing only on "consequences," not "intentions,"; see Max Weber, "Value-Judgements in Social Science," in *Selections in Translation*, ed. W. G. Runciman, trans. E. Matthews (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 89.
12. Jochens, "The Politics," p. 349; Sturla Þórðarson, *Det Arnamagnæanske Haandskrift 81a Fol. (Skálholtsbók yngsta) inholdende Sverris saga, Bøglunga sögur, Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, ed. A. Kjær (Oslo: Den Norske Historiske Kildeskriftkommission, 1985), p. 492 (hereafter *Hákonar saga*).
13. For discussion, see for example, Jon Gunnar Jørgensen, "Ynglinga saga mellom fornaldersaga og kongesaga," in *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed; Studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson, and Annette Lassen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Forlag, 2009), pp. 49–59.
14. *Heimskringla*, 1: 71 and 1: 38. Guðrún Járn-Skeggjádóttir, one of the wives of Óláfr Tryggvason, was married to the king against her will and tries to kill him on their wedding night, *Heimskringla* 1: 318–19. Jochens suggests that the narrator is thus saying that she had not been asked for or given her consent; see Jochens, "Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life, and Literature," *Scandinavian Studies* 58 (1986): 155.
15. *Heimskringla* 1: 84. Hálfðán svarti "the black" only becomes king when he is 18. Thus along with Geira, Ása is a rare example of a queen ruling without at least a male figurehead on the throne, for the text says nothing about her son becoming ruler, if only nominally, until he officially becomes king.
16. As Annette Lassen argues, the *fornaldarsögur* may initially have been composed as historiography in the late twelfth century; she links them to Continental historiography that similarly included fantastic episodes; see "Origines Gentium and the Learned Origin of *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*", pp. 33–58. In some manuscripts, *konungasögur* contain episodes, interpolations, and short tales (*þættir*) that are highly fantastic, and *Jómsvíkinga saga* is another example of a historiographical text that blurs genre boundaries.
17. *Heimskringla* 1: 96.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 21.
20. *Laxdæla saga*, p. 44.
21. *Egils saga*, pp. 107–11 and 183–84.
22. *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, p. 49.
23. William Sayers, "Power, Magic and Sex: Queen Gunnhildr and the Icelanders," *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies/Études scandinaves au Canada* VIII (1995): 57–77.
24. Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Viking*. 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 122, n. 1.
25. In the Latin twelfth-century *Historia Norvegiæ*, composed in Norway, Gunnhildr is said to be the daughter of Gormr, king of Denmark, which scholars generally accept as accurate, whereas in *Haraldar saga hárfagra* (*Heimskringla* 1: 135), *Ágrip* (p. 8) and *Fagrskinna* (p. 79), her father is said to be Qzurr, nicknamed *lafskegg* or *toti*, from Hálógaland, and she is said to practice magic in *Ágrip* (p. 14). See *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum: A Twelfth-Century Synoptic History of the Kings of Norway*. 2nd edn., ed. and trans. M. J. Driscoll (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2008) (hereafter *Ágrip*). References to

- Fagrskinna are from Ágrip af Noregskonunga sögum: *Fagrskinna—Nóregs konunga tal*, ÍF XXIX, ed. Bjarni Einarsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1984) (hereafter *Fagrskinna*). For discussion of these accounts' historicity as untrustworthy, see for example, Ágrip, pp. 87–88; Jóna Guðbjörg Torfadóttir, "Í orðastað Alfifu," *Skírnir* 178 (2004): 35–57.
26. *Jómsvíkinga saga*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson (Reykjavík: Prentsmiðja Jóns Helgasonar, 1969), pp. 79–84 (hereafter *Jómsvíkinga saga*); Ágrip, p. 20.
 27. *Jómsvíkinga saga*, p. 84.
 28. *Heimskringla* 1: 149.
 29. John Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, in *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 71. Pauline Stafford rejects Asser's explanation, maintaining that the limits imposed on queens' power in ninth-century Wessex came down to politics; see "The King's Wife in Wessex, 800–1066," in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 58 [56–78].
 30. Stafford, "The King's Wife," p. 60.
 31. Pauline Stafford, "Sons and Mothers: Family Politics in the Early Middle Ages," in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Blackwell for the Ecclesiastical History Society, 1978), pp. 85–86 [79–100].
 32. Jochens, "The Politics," p. 332.
 33. Jochens, "The Politics," pp. 343–34.
 34. *Heimskringla* 1: 198; Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 351.
 35. *Heimskringla* 1: 198 and 1: 204. In Ágrip, the epithet appears in an account of how Gunnhildr and Hǫkon jarl struggled for power in Norway after the death of Haraldr gráfeldr, her son; in *Jómsvíkinga saga*, Haraldr gráfeldr and Gunnhildr konungamóðir are said to rule jointly.
 36. *Heimskringla* 2: 410.
 37. *Heimskringla* 1: 227–29; *Hákonar saga*, pp. 295–99, esp. p. 296.
 38. *Heimskringla* 1: 229.
 39. *Hákonar saga*, p. 296.
 40. For further discussion about Inga's ordeal, see Jochens, "The Politics," pp. 342–43; Larrington, "Queens and Bodies," 516–17. See also Guðrún's ordeal in *Guðrúnarkviða III* and discussion in Eichhorn-Mulligan, "Contextualizing Old Norse-Icelandic Bodies," pp. 198–207.
 41. *Heimskringla* 2: 4 and 2: 107. There are several more accounts of Ásta in the Bergsbók manuscript, but space does not allow further discussion of these scenes.
 42. *Heimskringla* 2: 344; *Heimskringla* 3: 17–18.
 43. *Heimskringla* 2: 112; *Heimskringla* 1: 253. Ullarakr is also the residence of the maiden-king in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* and seems to be associated in some way with female rulers.
 44. Both women accuse their husbands of cowardice if they fail to fight the other; see *Heimskringla* 1: 343 and 1: 349. Jochens considers these characters to be inspired by whetting women in eddic poetry, and to be invented by medieval authors; see *Old Norse Images*, pp. 174–182.
 45. *Heimskringla* 2: 90. This speech will be analyzed in further detail later.
 46. *Heimskringla* 2: 90; see also chapter 1 for analysis of incitement speeches.
 47. *Heimskringla* 2: 90; *Hrafnkels saga*, p. 127. See also discussion in chapter 1 of this book.
 48. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (*Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*), ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 1: 215.
 49. Katherine Harloe has further suggested that power relationships are more of a two-way street than Weber will acknowledge; according to her, the social relationship in which power exists affects and shapes both those who rule, and those dominated, not just the latter; see "Can Political Theory Provide a Model for Reception? Max Weber and Hannah Arendt," *Cultural Critique* 74 (2010): 17–31.
 50. Pauline Stafford, "The Portrayal of Royal Women in England, Mid-Tenth to Mid-Twelfth Centuries," in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John Carmi Parsons, 2nd edn. (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1998), p. 145 [143–68].
 51. *Heimskringla* 2: 275.

52. *Heimskringla* 2: 276.
53. A similar example in terms of a queen seemingly working outside her legitimate sphere of power is found in *Vǫlsunga saga* where Grímhildr uses deception and magic potions in order to protect the interest of her dynasty and acquire a worthy husband for her daughter. In this saga the king, Gjúki, seems entirely absent.
54. *Heimskringla* 2: 401. See another account in *Ágrip*, p. 44.
55. *Fagrskinna*, pp. 201–2.
56. This is in *Tómasskinna*, a manuscript containing one redaction of the *Separate saga of St. Ólaf*; see *Den store saga om Olav den hellige*, p. 777.
57. *Heimskringla* 2: 404–5.
58. *Fagrskinna*, p. 206. For an extended discussion about *níð* and its complex connotations, see Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. Joan Turville-Petre (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983).
59. *Fagrskinna*, p. 206.
60. “[Þ]ótti þó Álfifu margt vantalat” [Álfifa considered much left to discuss], *Fagrskinna*, p. 207.
61. *Fagrskinna*, p. 210; *Heimskringla* 3: 10–11.
62. *Heimskringla* 3: 4–5.
63. *Heimskringla* 3: 6.
64. *Heimskringla* 3: 20, trans. Jesch, “In Praise of Ástríðr,” p. 12.
65. *Ágrip*, p. 44.
66. *Heimskringla* 2: 85.
67. *Heimskringla* 1: 90.
68. As discussed earlier, this appears to function as an incitement speech.
69. *Heimskringla* 2: 115.
70. In the *Legendary saga*, Óláfr *sænski* consults Ingigerðr and asks her opinion on Hjalti’s character and when they have agreed that he is “vittr maðr oc væl um sec” [a wise man and well informed], Óláfr decides to allow Hjalti to address the princess; see the *Legendary Saga*, p. 96.
71. *Heimskringla* 2: 99–100. The *Legendary Saga* account of the talks between Hjalti and Ingigerðr essentially agrees with *Heimskringla* but relates it more dramatically and smoothly; see further below.
72. Jenny M. Jochens, “Consent,” (1986), pp. 169–70 [142–76].
73. Although it is not related in Norse sources, the historical Ingigerðr had an illustrious career in Russia and became a local saint.
74. *Heimskringla* 2: 147.
75. Schottmann, “Friðgerðarsaga,” p. 543.
76. Schottman, “Friðgerðarsaga,” pp. 539–53; see also Johnsen, *Friðgerðar-saga*.
77. The author nevertheless includes the story of the hunt and Óláfr *sænski*’s argument with his daughter in *Heimskringla* but not until after he has made it clear that the king had been keeping Óláfr *digri* waiting all summer, hardly suggesting that he was eager to adhere to the agreement.
78. *Legendary Saga*, p. 102.
79. *Legendary Saga*, pp. 102–4.
80. Heinrichs considers this detail as a parallel to *Gísla saga*, in which women give men shirts as a token of their love or sexual desire; this seems an equally plausible idea, but if true, the gold embroidery seems a courtly addition to the indigenous motif; see Heinrichs, “Wenn ein König,” p. 38.
81. Jochens, “Consent,” pp. 142–76.
82. Rosemary Power, “*Le Lai de Lanval and Helga þátr Þórissonar*,” *Opuscula* 8, Bibliotheca Arnarnagæana 38 (1985): 160.
83. The *Bergsbók* text contains many interpolations, especially concerning miracles and marvels, some of which do not appear in any other sources and have been attributed to the manuscript’s editor; Gustaf Lindblad, “Introduction,” in *Bergsbók. Perg. Fol. Nr. 1 in the Royal Library, Stockholm*, Early Icelandic Manuscripts in Facsimile 5, ed. Gustaf Lindblad (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1963), pp. 8, 12.
84. *Den store saga om Olav den hellige*, pp. 769–70.
85. Heinrichs, “Wenn ein König,” p. 42.

86. Tómasskinna has a distinct interest in saints, containing *Tómas saga erkibiskups*, the story of the life of St. Thomas à Becket, and the *Separate saga*; Agnete Loth, "Introduction," in *Thomasskinna. Gl. Kgl. Saml. 1008 fol. in the Royal Library, Copenhagen*, Early Icelandic Manuscripts in Facsimile 6, ed. Agnete Loth (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1964), p. 7.
87. *Den store saga om Olav den hellige*, pp. 770–1.
88. Heinrichs, "Wenn ein König," p. 49.
89. Bagge, *Society and Politics*, pp. 102–3.
90. The poem is not called a *mansöngr* in many of the primary manuscripts of the *þáttur* whereas it is in the *Legendary Saga* and Styrmir's text. *Mansöngr* was an offensive form of love poetry, punishable with *skóggangr* "lesser outlawry" according to the *Grágás* law; in the *Íslendingasögur*, it was often followed by vengeance of some kind; for discussion see for example, Jenny M. Jochens, "From Libel to Lament: Male Manifestations of Love in Old Norse," in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1992), pp. 247–64.
91. *Den store saga om Olav den hellige*, p. 706.

5 The Female Ruler

1. For a detailed discussion of the origins of the maiden-king motif, see Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, "From Heroic Legend to 'Medieval Screwball Comedy'? The Development and Interpretation of the *meykóngur* motif," in *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*, ed. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney, and Ármann Jakobsson (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2012), pp. 229–49.
2. A distinction is made between, first, the maiden-king motif, which may appear in sagas that are not maiden-king texts per se but contain maiden-king episodes, for example, the *fornaldarsögur* *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, and the *riddarasögur* *Ála flekks saga*, *Gibbons saga*, *Mágus saga jarls*, and *Partalopa saga*, and, second, maiden-king romances, a subgenre of indigenous romances in which the maiden-king is the main female character, and the plot follows the bridal-quest paradigm. These are *Clári saga*, *Dínus saga drambláta*, *Nitida saga*, *Sírgarðs saga frækna*, *Sigurðar saga þøgla*, and *Viktors saga ok Blávus*. Some texts are on the margins of being strictly maiden-king romances: for example, the maiden-king plot only begins two-thirds of the way into *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, after many other scenes, and a few of the maiden-kings are not rulers in name. However, since these texts broadly follow the paradigm and contain most of the pertinent elements, I include them in the discussion.
3. See chapter 1.
4. For discussion, see for example, Judy Quinn, "The Realisation of Mythological Design: The Early Generations of the Völsung Dynasty," in *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed; Studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson, and Annette Lassen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanums Forlag, 2009), pp. 181–200.
5. Olimpia in *Samsons saga fagra* is an active character who works toward establishing and preserving peace, see further Werner Schäfke, "The 'Wild' East in Late Medieval Icelandic Romance—Just a Prop(p)?," in *Á austrvega: Saga and East Scandinavia. Preprint Papers of The 14th International Saga Conference. Uppsala, 9th-15th August, 2009*, ed. Agneta Ney et al. (Gävle: Gävle University Press, 2009), p. 849 [2: 845–50]. Tecla, the lady-in-waiting in *Clári saga*, can also be seen as somewhat active. However, these figures' actions are beneficial to the protagonist or the community and thus not portrayed negatively.
6. *Sigurðar saga þøgla*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, ed. Agnete Loth (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1963), 2: 102. A shorter redaction of this saga is published in *Sigurðar saga þøgla. The Shorter Redaction: Edited from AM 596 4to*, ed. Matthew James Driscoll (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1992).
7. *Sírgarðs saga frækna*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, ed. Agnete Loth (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1965), 5: 48–49; *Bragða-Mágus saga með tilheyrandi þáttum: Skrifuð upp eptir gömlum handritum*, ed. Gunnlaugur Þórðarsson (Copenhagen: Páll Sveinsson, 1858) p. 160; *Nitida saga*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, ed. Agnete Loth (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1965), 5: 3; *Ála flekks saga*, in *Drei lygisögur*, Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek

- 17, ed. Åke Lagerholm (Halle: Niemeyer Verlag, 1927), p. 95.
8. “[S]akir hennar vizku lýtr nálíga at henni öll stjórn ríkisins jafnfram sjálfum konungi” [because of her wisdom, she carries nearly all the kingdom’s government], *Clári saga*, p. 5.
9. *Nitida saga*, pp. 10–11. The same is true for Fulgida in *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, Riddarasögur II, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Handritastofnun Íslands, 1964), pp. 36–37.
10. *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, pp. 4–5.
11. *Nitida saga*, p. 4.
12. Séréna in *Clári saga* is said to practice *kukl ok klókskapr* “sorcery and wiliness,” p. 7; Sedentiana in *Sigurðar saga þøgla* uses *vándir gerningar* “evil sorcery,” p. 101. Examples of supernatural objects are Nitida’s magic stone that enables her simply to fly away, whereas *Viktors saga ok Blávus* and *Dínus saga dramláta* involve sleeping potions. For discussion of this feature in Continental romance, see Larrington, *King Arthur’s Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), Chapter 5.
13. Only in some sources does their rulership seem to be negatively presented: in *Gibbons saga*, the narrator disapprovingly remarks that the female ruler is so *ballðin* “impudent” as to take the title of king. *Gibbons saga*, Editiones Arnarnæðanæ B2, ed. R. I. Page (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1960), p. 22.
14. For example, *Sigurðar saga þøgla* relates that Sedentiana is “míll af fe og gaf storum fe” [generous of money and gave away money in large sums]; *Sigurðar saga þøgla*, pp. 102–3. In *Mottuls saga*, King Arthur is “hinn mílldasti að gíofum” [the most generous with gifts]; *Mottuls saga*, Editiones Arnarnæðanæ B30, ed. Marianne Kalinke (Copenhagen: C. A. Rietzels Forlag, 1987), p. 3.
15. See for example, *Sigrarðs saga frækna*, pp. 52–53; *Clári saga*, p. 20.
16. *Hrólfs saga kraka*, Editiones Arnarnæðanæ B1, ed. Desmond Slay (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1960), p. 17.
17. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, pp. 70–71. In the shorter redaction, Hrólfr directly confronts the maiden-king about her gender, and a fight ensues.
18. This is with the exception of pagan suitors, who pose a much greater threat and are not treated with much respect. See further discussion later.
19. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland*, *Islandica* 46 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 90. In contrast, see the positive attitude to women’s wisdom in the *fornaldarsögur* discussed in chapter 1, as well as the image of Queen Ástríðr as a wise and eloquent woman, outlined in chapter 4. Furthermore, see the representation of wise women in *Samsons saga fagra* and *Parcevals saga*, discussed by Schäffe, “The Wild East,” and F. Regina Psaki, “Women’s Counsel in the *Riddarasögur*: The Case of *Parcevals saga*,” in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson with Karen Swenson (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 201–24.
20. *Sigurðar saga þøgla*, pp. 100–01.
21. Haughtiness stemming from too much learning also appears in *Mírmanns saga* (Brígiða), p. 2; Philotemia and Dínus in *Dínus saga dramláta* are, unusually, equally arrogant because of their intellect and learning; *Dínus saga dramláta*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, 1960), p. 10.
22. *Dínus saga dramláta*, p. 69.
23. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*, p. 98.
24. *Clári saga*, p. 36. Fulgida in *Viktors saga ok Blávus* covets Viktor’s magic chest, which never lacks gold; *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, p. 39.
25. *Hrólfs saga kraka*, p. 21. Greed is also one of the wicked stepmother’s curses on Ingigerðr in *Sigrarðs saga frækna*, p. 48; Sigrarðr tries to tempt her with treasures although he does not have Helgi’s success.
26. Kalinke, “*Clári saga*, *Hrólfs saga*,” p. 8 in ms.
27. *Völsunga saga*, p. 53. In *Sigurðarqviða in scamma*, it is Brynhildr’s brother Atli who tells her that she will have neither “gull né iarðir, nema ec gefaz létac” [neither gold nor land, unless I let myself be betrothed]; *Sigurðarqviða in scamma* st. 36, *Edda*, p. 213; *Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, p. 187.
28. See Ricketts, *High-Ranking Widows in Medieval Iceland and Yorkshire. Property, Power, Marriage and Identity in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), Chapter

29. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*, p. 79.
30. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, p. 54.
31. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, p. 54.
32. A similar ethical judgment is found in *Gibbons saga*, mentioned on p. 165, fn. 13.
33. *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, p. 50.
34. In *Sigurðar saga þögla*, pp. 182–85, Sedentiana devises an effective plan for fighting Sigurðr's invading army, and then gives her troops a rallying speech before the battle.
35. See *Bragða-Mágus saga*, pp. 14–15; *Mírmanns saga*, pp. 60–63.
36. *Mírmanns saga*, p. 61; see Sverrir Tómasson, "Mírmanns saga: The First Old Norse-Icelandic Hagiographical Romance?," in *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland: Essays in Honor of Marianne Kalinke*, *Islandica* 54, ed. Kirsten Wolf and Johanna Denzin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Library, 2008), pp. 319–35.
37. Ólöf ríka "the powerful" Loftsdóttir is a real medieval example of a woman taking up weapons; see Inga Huld Hákonardóttir, "Frá aðalskonum til hversdagskvenna," *Íslenskt samfélag og Rómakirkja*, Kristni á Íslandi 2, ed. Hjalti Hugason (Reykjavík: Alþingi, 2000), p. 266.
38. The shield-maiden appears in many Old Norse-Icelandic and Germanic sources, including Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, and has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate, see for example, Carol J. Clover, "Maiden Warriors and Other Sons," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 85 (1986): 35–49; Lena Norrman, "Woman or Warrior? The Construction of Gender in Old Norse Myth," in *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society: The Proceedings of the 11th International Saga Conference 2-7 July 2000, University of Sydney*, ed. Geraldine Barnes and Margaret Clunies Ross, (Sydney: Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Sydney, 2000), pp. 375–85; William Layher, "Caught between Worlds: Gendering the Maiden Warrior in Old Norse," in *Women and Medieval Epic: Gender, Genre, and the Limits of Epic Masculinity*, ed. Sara S. Poor and Jana K. Schulman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 183–208.
39. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 33.
40. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, pp. 83–84.
41. Compare how the narrative depicts her as socially male. Female characters such as Auðr in *Gísla saga*, whom Clover argues is *hvöt* enough to be deemed on the powerful side of her one-sex model, have no male-coded identity in a similar way to Þornbjörg, who refuses to go by a female pronoun or name. For readings that also address the role that gender plays in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, see Layher, "Caught Between Worlds," pp. 183–208, esp. p. 202; Norrman, "Woman or Warrior?"
42. *Clári saga*, p. 74. Kalinke has argued that this part of the saga, expressing a clerical view of marriage, did not appeal to audiences due to its absence in other maiden-king texts.
43. See for example, Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas: studien zur Prosaliteratur im spätmittelalterlichen Island* (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1983), pp. 206–7; Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken*, p. 577; Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, pp. 102–3; Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance*, pp. 78–79; Sif Ríkharrsdóttir, "Meykóngahæfðin í riddarasögnum. Hugmyndafræðileg átök um kynhlutverk og þjóðfélagssöðu," *Skírnr* 184 (2010): 410–33.
44. Kalinke, "Clári saga, *Hrólfs saga*," p. 9 in ms.
45. *Dínus saga*, pp. 30–35.
46. *Sigurðar saga þögla*, p. 127. Shaving and tarring is also found in *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, and the *Helga þátr* of *Hrólfs saga kraka*. On this motif, see for example, Ármann Jakobsson, "Queens of Terror: Perilous Women in *Hálfs saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*," in *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi: Handlingar från ett symposium i Uppsala 31.8-2.9 2001*, eds. Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen, and Agneta Ney (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2003), pp. 178–80 [173–89]; and Henric Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom: Sexualitet, homosocialitet och aristokratisk identitet på det senmedeltida Island* (Gothenburg: Göteborgs universitet, 2009), pp. 167–74.
47. *Nitida saga*, pp. 18–21.
48. Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom*, pp. 173–74.
49. Eichhorn-Mulligan, "Contextualizing," p. 198. See also chapter 3 of this book.
50. Eichhorn-Mulligan, "Contextualizing," pp. 198–207, M. F. Thomas, "The Briar and the

- Vine: Tristan Goes North,” in *Arthurian Literature*, ed. Richard Barber (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1983), p. 57 [3: 53–90].
51. See Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: Sage, 2002), pp. 1–8.
52. *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, p. 60.
53. *Dínus saga*, p. 36.
54. *Dínus saga*, pp. 40–41.
55. Carolynne Larrington argues that translated poems such as *Geitarlauf* (Marie de France’s *Chievrefoil*) bring to prominence “male interiority,” that is, expressions of male romantic love, previously rarely articulated or recorded in Old Norse literary tradition; see “The Translated *lais*,” in *The Arthur of the North: The Arthurian Legend in the Nordic and Rus’ Realms*, ed. Marianne Kalinke (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011) pp. 83–84 [77–97].
56. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, “The Icelandic Aristocracy after the Fall of the Free State,” *Scandinavian Journal of History* 20 (1995): 158 [153–66]; Sigríður Beck, *I kungens fránvaro. Formeringen av en isländsk aristokrati 1271-1387* (Gothenburg: Göteborgs universitet, 2011), pp. 156–63.
57. Kalinke, “*Clári saga*, *Hrólfs saga*,” pp. 11–13 in ms.
58. Larrington, “‘What Does Woman Want?’ Mær and munr in *Skírnismál*,” *Alvíssmál* 1 (1992): 14.
59. Larrington, “What Does Woman Want?,” pp. 7–10.
60. Larrington, “What Does Woman Want?,” p. 10.
61. *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, p. 48.
62. The audience knows that she cannot control her own actions with regards to Sigrgarðr: when she hears (false) reports about his death, she feigns indifference but, like Áslaug in *Ragnars saga*, she cries a single bloody tear for him.
63. *Clári saga*, p. 53. It does not say that it was short at the back, but the phrase *skarpr skinnstakkr* is identical with examples from the *fornaldarsögur*, see chapter 3. In female saints’ lives, the pagans often take away the future saints’ clothes, as punishment for refusing to marry, forcing them to be naked in public, see for example, *Agnesar saga*, *Margrétar saga*, and *Barböru saga*, in *Heilagra meyja sögur*, ed. Kirsten Wolf (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2003).
64. *Clári saga*, p. 53.
65. *Clári saga*, pp. 54, 59.
66. As Eichhorn-Mulligan as well as Jochens note, descriptions of women in Old Norse texts are limited to their face, hair, and hands, indicating that it was considered proper for their bodies to be fully covered.
67. *Clári saga*, p. 65.
68. Shaun F. D. Hughes, “*Klári saga* as an Indigenous Romance,” in *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland: Essays in Honor of Marianne Kalinke*, ed. Kirsten Wolf and Johanna Denzin, *Islandica* 54 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Library, 2008), p. 156 [135–63].
69. See *Heilagra meyja sögur*, for example, *Agnesar saga*, where Agnes is hit in the face, her breasts are severed from her body, and she is thrown onto glowing-hot stones; *Dóróteu saga*, in which Dórótea is boiled in a large vessel and also subjected to mastectomy; *Barböru saga*, where Barbara is beaten and mistreated by her father; and *Lúcióu saga*, in which urine, hot tar, oil, and pitch are poured over Lúcióa, and she is subsequently burned at the stake.
70. For *Skírnis* [*Skírnismál*] st. 36, *Edda*, p. 76.
71. *Sigurðar saga þögla*, pp. 203–4.
72. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 161–62; Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), p. 74. Medieval authors often had difficulties reconciling the two ideas, resulting in a theory of the separation of women’s rational will, and their carnal desires and pleasure, which, according to some, give way to the former during rape; for discussion, see Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 94–95, 142–43.
73. Laqueur, *Making Sex*, pp. 161–62; Bagerius, *Mandom och Mödom*, pp. 163.

74. Gibbons *saga*, p. 75.
75. Icelandic manuscripts of the *saga* attest to the fact that it was in circulation in the country; see Larrington, “Queens and Bodies,” pp. 520–22.
76. *Clári saga*, p. 39. See also *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, in which the suitor in disguise offers the maiden-king treasures in return for sex: “hann seger þá [grípina] ej fala vera nema firer siálfrar hennar blíðu” [he says that the precious objects would not be obtainable except in return for her own sexual favors], p. 66.
77. *Dínus saga*, p. 31.
78. *Ibid.*, pp. 64–68.
79. *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, p. 44.
80. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
81. *Bragða-Mágus saga*, pp. 161–62.
82. Furthermore, in Commonwealth law, children born out of wedlock could inherit from their fathers, although they were further down the inheritance line than legitimate children; see Ricketts, *High-Ranking Widows*, p. 63.
83. Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom*, pp. 63–64. On women’s generous right to inherit according to Commonwealth lawcodes, see Ricketts, *High-Ranking Widows*, pp. 51–67.
84. *Dínus saga dramláta*, p. 67.
85. See §31, *Jónsbók. Lögbók Íslendinga hver samþykkt var á alþingi árið 1281 og endurnýjuð um miðja 14. öld en fyrst prentuð árið 1578*, ed. Már Jónsson (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2004), p. 120. Scholars of English medieval literature have emphasized the difficulty of discussing the term “rape” in an historical context due to its cultural specificity in modern times, see for example, Elizabeth Robertson and Christine Rose’s introduction to *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2001) and Saunders’s introduction to *Rape and Ravishment*. Saunders also discusses the historical development of rape as a concept in medieval England, noting that in the fourteenth century, the distinction between rape and abduction (whether with the woman’s consent or not) becomes blurred, the latter being foregrounded as the more serious crime while a raped woman’s legal status is increasingly marginalized; p. 62. *Jónsbók* (p. 103) seems clear on the separation between abduction (*hlaupa í brott með eiginkonur manna* “to run away with men’s wives,” *konur taka með ráni eður herfangi* “to capture women by kidnapping or enslavement”), and rape (*taka konu nauðga* “to take a woman by force”).
86. Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, pp. 48–57.
87. Luce Irigaray, “Commodities among Themselves,” in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 192–97; Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). See also Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, p. 70.
88. Cf. §2 and §31 in the “Mannhelgi” section of *Jónsbók*, pp. 102–3, p. 120; Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, p. 49.
89. See also Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom*, p. 163.
90. *Ibid.*, pp. 158–59.
91. For arguments supporting a fourteenth-century dating of *Grettis saga*, see Guðni Jónsson’s introduction to the Íslensk fornrit edition.
92. *Grettis saga*, pp. 239–41.
93. The motif of drugging a man and afterwards deceiving him about having had sex with him also appears in Merlin/Viviane narratives; see Larrington, *King Arthur’s Enchantresses*, p. 111.
94. *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, p. 55.
95. *Ibid.*, pp. 57–58.
96. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
97. *Partalopa saga*, Editiones Arnarnagðænae B28, ed. Lise Præstgaard Andersen (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels forlag, 1983), pp. 32–33.
98. See also stepmothers who enchant their stepdaughters, perhaps for their protection, in chapter 3.
99. *Sigurðar saga þögla* p. 196; *hinn svart* “the black one” refers to Sigurðr in disguise. In *Beowulf*, Fremu/Modþryþo’s main objection was to being looked at: “þæt hire an dægse eægum starede” [that they stared at her all the time]; Klaeber’s *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, 4th edn. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), l. 1935, p. 65. As Larrington notes, one of Skírnir’s

- threats to Gerðr is to be stared at; Larrington, "What Does Woman Want?," p. 8. On the male gaze, gender, and subject/object positions, see for example, Laura Mulvey's classic essay in film studies, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 no. 3 (1975): 6–18.
100. *Clári saga*, p. 22.
 101. Paul Bibire, "From *riddarasaga* to *lygisaga*: The Norse Response to Romance," in *Les Sagas de Chevaliers (riddarasögur): Actes de la Ve Conférence Internationale sur les Sagas*, ed. Régis Boyer (Toulon: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 1985), pp. 55–74.
 102. Guðbjörg Aðalbergsdóttir, "Nítiða og aðrir meykóngar," *Mímir* 32–3 (1993–4): 54–55 [44–55].
 103. See *Agnesar saga*, *Dóróteu saga*, *Barböru saga*, and *Lúciu saga*.
 104. *Nitida saga*, pp. 27–28.
 105. *Sigrgarðs saga frækna* presents the similar view that using violence to woo a maiden-king is unproductive, when Gerðr, the mother of the suitor's childhood friends, is the only person to realize that the maiden-king has been bewitched and advises Sigrgarðr (who has made two unsuccessful attempts at winning Ingigerðr) to use other methods than invading Ingigerðr's kingdom; *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, p. 67.
 106. Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, *Property and Virginity: The Christianization of Marriage in Medieval Iceland 1200–1600* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2010), p. 98; Jochens, "Consent in Marriage," 144; Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 46. Canon law and secular law did not always agree in Iceland and were a matter of contention between representatives of the two spheres; see Gunnar F. Guðmundsson, *Íslenskt samfélag og Rómakirkja*, Kristni á Íslandi 2, ed. Hjalti Hugason (Reykjavík: Alþingi, 2000), p. 258. Bishop Árni Þorláksson made an unsuccessful attempt to have the principle of female consent included in *Jónsbók* so that women who married against their parent's will would not be disinherited; see further Agnes Arnórsdóttir, *Property*, pp. 98–99.
 107. Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest: The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France*, trans. Barbara Bray (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), pp. 221–22. See also Ad Putter, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and *French Arthurian Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), pp. 188–229.
 108. *Clári saga* is an exception; Séréna and her lady-in-waiting Tecla have frequent quarrels about Séréna's mistreatment of Clárus, for which Tecla reproaches her sternly. However, given the saga's overtly didactic intention, it seems that this character is a plot device, a foil to show how a woman *should* behave and to illustrate Séréna's wicked nature.
 109. The aunt's advice is in the same vein as Parceval's mother's instructions to her son, *Parcevals saga*, in *Riddarasögur: Parcevals saga. Valvers þáttur. Ívents saga. Mírmans saga*, ed. Eugen Kölbing (Strasbourg: Karl J. Trübner, 1872), pp. 4–5. In *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, the suitor only manages to win the maiden-king when Gerðr gives him advice and a magic sack to help him; *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, p. 67. For discussion about the positive value of female advice in *Parcevals saga*, and its emphasis on the spiritual over the knightly, see Psaki, "Women's Counsel in the *Riddarasögur*," pp. 201–24.
 110. Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1981): 195.
 111. Information on the two Benedictine nunneries in Iceland (at Kirkjubær and Reynistaður) is limited; most of it derives from charters and annals. On the convents in Iceland, see Anna Sigurðardóttir, *Allt hafði annan róm áður í páfádóm: nunnuklaustrin tvö á Íslandi á miðöldum og brot úr kristnisögu* (Reykjavík: Kvennasögusafn Íslands, 1988); Inga Huld Hákonardóttir, "Í nunnuklaustri—Kirkjubær og Reynistaður," in *Íslenskt samfélag og Rómakirkja*, Kristni á Íslandi 2, ed. Hjalti Hugason (Reykjavík: Alþingi, 2000), pp. 225–29; Kirsten Wolf, "Female Scribes at Work? A Consideration of Kirkjubæjarbók (Codex AM 429 12mo)," *Beatus Vir: Studies in Early English and Norse Manuscripts in Memory of Phillip Pulsiano*, ed. A. N. Doane and Kirsten Wolf (Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, 2006), pp. 265–95.
 112. Bagerius, *Mandom och Mödom*, p. 43.
 113. *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 204, 115.
 114. Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, "Marriage in the Middle Ages: Canon Law and Nordic Family Relations," in *Norden og Europa i middelalderen. Rapporter til Det 24. Nordiske Historikermøde, Århus 9.-13. august 2001*, ed. Per Ingesman and Thomas Lindkvist (Århus: Jysk Selskab for Historie, 2001), p. 178 [174–202].

Conculsion

1. Research on these themes as they developed in the post-Commonwealth period is relatively scant compared to the work on the period before 1262, although it is currently expanding (see e.g., Henric Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom Sexualitet, homosocialitet och aristokratisk identitet på det senmedeltida Island*. Gothenburg: Göteborgs universitet, 2009; Sigríður Beck, *I kungens frånvaro: Formeringen av en isländsk aristokrati 1271–1387*. Gothenburg: Göteborgs universitet, 2011).
2. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, in *Zwei Fornaldarsögur*, p. 24.

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